

**PRODUCING TEA COOLIES?: WORK, LIFE AND PROTEST
IN THE COLONIAL TEA PLANTATIONS OF ASSAM, 1830S-
1920s**

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M.A. Nitin Varma

Gutachterinnen:

1. Prof. Dr. Michael Mann

2. Prof. Dr. Ravi Ahuja

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Dekan der Philosophischen Fakultät III: Prof. Dr. Bernd Wegener

Präsident der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: Prof. Dr. Jan-Hendrik Olbertz

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Introduction

A set of people ‘growing up for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild beasts and to plant and cultivate the luxury of the world—tea.’¹

...the penal labour legislation (Contract), the strong feeling of esprit de-corps among the planting community, and their intimate social relations with the Government officials, all combine to put the coolies at a disadvantage. The ‘unwritten law in this district is that once a tea garden coolie, always a tea-garden coolie.’²

The strike of the coolies of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against the age-old tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims...not only men but women and children have the same old story...the helpless coolie passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity...But his redemption has at last come...he is determined to break the shackles forever or die in the attempt.³

The statements mark three different moments in the history of contract coolies in Assam tea plantations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The first remark made by Robert Bruce—the in charge of the tea “experiment” of East India Company in the early nineteenth century—encapsulates a desire for “settled” workers for any future “commercial” success of tea enterprise in Assam. Such an aspiration seems to have been realised—in the form of tea coolies—as described by a colonial officer of Assam at the beginning of the twentieth century. The end of this coolie labour system is confidently prophesied in the last extract from a nationalist daily at the height of the most celebrated “episode” of coolie protest on the Assam plantations in 1921.

These remark also outlining the limits of this study—suggests an obvious chronology and a given process of the idea, realisation and end of coolie-labour on Assam plantations.

Coolie, a generic category for the ‘unskilled’ manual worker, offering services for hire had various pre-colonial lineages⁴, was attempted to be recast in the

¹ R Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce of the tea plantations in Assam* (Calcutta, 1839) p.14.

² J Johnston, DC Cachar to Secty to Chief Commissioner, No 1658 E, Silchar 12th Dec 1903, Assam State Archives. Hereafter, ASA.

³ *Amrit Bazaar Patrika*, 20th May 1921. National Archives of India. Hereafter NAI.

⁴ The etymology of the term is sometimes traced to the Tamil word *kūli*, signifying ‘hire’ or ‘wage’, and also to the ethnic group (Koli) performing menial tasks in Western India. A. Yule,

late eighteenth-nineteenth century colonial capitalist worlds, through discursive constructions and material practices for ‘mobilised-immobilised’ labour.⁵ In particular, the ‘coolie labour system’ organised in a period of abolitionism, was often depicted as a ‘solution’ to the impending ‘problems of labour shortage’.⁶ Soon women, men and families indentured and shipped from the ports of India and China began supplementing and at times replacing the slaves on the capitalist enterprises of the Caribbean, east and southern Africa, the Indian and Pacific oceans and Australasia.⁷ The aspiration of freedom that encapsulated the spirit of abolitionism was apparently undermined by contracts which bounded the ‘free labour’, raising moral indignation and political action. Coolie labour, was often proclaimed as a particular compromise between the past (slave-labour) and the future (free-labour), straddling the two different regimes, yet a stage in that promised transition.⁸

C. Burnell and W. Crooke, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, (London, 1903) pp. 249-250.

⁵ I use this expression to underline the constant play of the strategies of mobilisation and immobilisation inherent in the coolie constructions. J. Breman and V. Daniel, 'The Making of a Coolie', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19 (1992).

⁶ For all the contradictions and confusions which marked the colonial construction of ‘labour problem’, the latter’s significance for the colonial project was enormous.

⁷ In the post-slavery plantations and colonial enterprises coolies came to be identified with the Asiatic labour from India and China, working under terms of indenture. The recruitment, transport and settlement of coolies was conducted under patronage of the colonial regimes and worked through native middlemen and recruiters, in what came to be described as the ‘coolie trade’. O. J. Hui, 'Chinese Indentured Labour: Coolies and Colonies', *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (1995) pp. 51-56.

⁸ The narrative of progress/transition was primarily an outcome of the post-Enlightenment spirit that freedom characterised the natural human condition and the ‘universalization of free labour was the *raison d’être* of history’. This discourse of freedom had apparently banished unfree labour relations (like coolie labour) from the life of capital. This goes against the findings of Gyan Prakash who has eloquently argued that the emergence of capitalism as a global system ‘took shape in and profited from structures ranging from *peasant* production to plantation slavery.’ The history of unfreedom, he contends, ‘is the history of capital in disguise.’ Keeping those qualifications in mind, the attempts then to write a history of coolie labour does not start from the premise that it was “not yet” proletarian labour or ‘not completely’ proletarian labour, but subscribes to a more “plural” notion of labour. G. Prakash, ‘Colonialism, capitalism and the discourse of freedom’, *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996) pp.9-26. Also see Linden, M. van der Linden, *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labor history* (Leiden, 2008).

Assam tea coolies have been subject to a variety of enquiries and historical studies. In the early studies on the Indian tea industry and some “pioneering” tea companies, issues of labour were either marginal or absent.⁹ The trade union activism of Sanat Bose, seminal scholarship of Ranajit Dasgupta¹⁰ and doctoral dissertations, in the late 1970 and 1980s, of Rana Behal, Ramakrishna Chattopadhyaya and M.A.B. Siddique, have brought plantation labour back into historical focus.¹¹

The historical interest in labour reflects a broader trend in historiography, where from some predictions of a decline and “end” of labour history has given way to a growing sense of renewal.¹² The new labour history has been very productive in exploring new themes and unsettling older frameworks and certainties. Yet an overwhelming emphasis on the indentured system and colonial policies has not yielded any sustained interest on the experiences of work and labour of Assam coolies and how such processes were negotiated and intervened by the workers. A point of departure of recent studies on the “indenture” has been the negotiations and experiences of social groups and even individuals. The wealth of “evidence” generated by an elaborate and intrusive colonial bureaucracy, monitoring and controlling the overseas movements, in contrast to a relatively more “deregulated” and less supervised Assam coolie system, has been critical in this incongruity.¹³ The lack of

⁹ P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967); H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948); H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957).

¹⁰ R. Dasgupta, ‘From Peasant to Tribesmen to Plantation workers’ in S Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp.19-23. S. Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian tea Industry*. (Bombay, 1954)

¹¹ R. Behal, *Some Aspects of the Growth of the Tea Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) 1900-1947*. (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1983); R. Chattopadhyaya, *Social Perspective of Labour Legislation in India: 1859-1932* (Calcutta University, 1987); M.A.B. Siddique, *Evolution of Land Grants and Labour Policy of Government* (New Delhi, 1990)

¹² P. Mohapatra, *Situating the renewal: reflections on labour studies in India* (New Delhi, 1998).

¹³ Many recent studies have documented and utilised a variety of sources like letters, petitions, depositions and oral testimonies to “deconstruct” the official view and understand the ‘experiences’ of migration and indentured labour in different contexts. For the Indian migrant in Mauritius M. Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London, 1996) and for the Chinese migrant in Cuba see L. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*:

scholarly attention should not imply that a more localised nature of the migration to Assam had less transformative consequences—social, biological and cultural—than the long and hazardous passages across the seas to distant destinations. The historical evidence of Assam coolie migration and settlement, to the contrary, suggests a substantial demographic movement over time, a higher incidence of abuses in recruitment, greater rates of mortality during transit and a largely “permanent” character of the population shift.¹⁴

A parallel trend to this large scale movement of individuals was the drives of plantation capitalism towards greater systematisation and routinisation. This changing nature and organization of Assam tea gardens remains to be conceptualised and historically situated. Such a process marked a shift from a predominantly violent strategy of work intensification and control of workers in the earlier plantations— to strategies of a closer supervision of their work and life—through an elaborate authority structure and newer forms of control on the late nineteenth century. A new ‘time-work-discipline’ was attempted to be formalised and enforced. The “industrial organisation” of work on plantations will seek a reassessment of an overt focus on coercive strategies of labour control in the literature.

Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba (Philadelphia, 2008). Some personal and autobiographical writing of indentured and ex-indentured labourers have been recently ‘unearthed’. The cases of Bechu (West Indies) and Munshi Rahman Khan (Surinam) are most well recorded. C. Seecharan, *Bechu: 'Bound Coolie' Radical in British Guiana 1894-1901* (Barbados, 1999) and M.R. Khan, *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer: Munshi Rahman Khan, 1874- 1972* (Delhi, 2005). For an analysis of Bechu’s “critique” of the indenture system through his writing in the press see P. Mohapatra, “Following Custom”? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880–1920’, *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006) pp.173-202.

¹⁴ R. Dasgupta, ‘Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India’ *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no.44-46 pp.1781-1806; P.Chaudhury, ‘Labour Migration from the United Provinces, 1881-1911’ *Studies in History* 8, no.13 (1992) pp.13-41; P. Mohapatra, ‘Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur’, *Studies in History* 1, no.2 (August 1985) pp.247-303; S. Chatterjee and R. Das Gupta, Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80, *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, nos. 44-46 (November 1981) pp.1861-1868; R Shlomowitz & L. Brennan, ‘Mortality and Migrant labour en route to Assam, 1863-1924’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, no.3 (Sep. 1990) pp.313-330. One such stream of migration from Chotanagpur to the tea plantations of Assam and Bengal is the subject of a recent documentary film *Kora Rajee* (Land of Diggers).

A stabilisation of plantations and the planter strategies of routines and supervision also occasioned cultures of work and life taking form on plantations. Culture—which has been a point of emphasis in the “new” labour history—is not taken in its essentialist sense. Culture is neither purely drawn for a pre—plantation past nor is it understood to be completely “derived” and produced from a new structural form—plantation. This will require a closer analysis of the quotidian practices of workers—where cultures and routines of work and life were produced, reproduced and transformed.

This emphasis will seek a re-evaluation of the nature and forms of bargaining and worker politics on the plantations. A body of scholarly literature has emphasised that the plantation regime and the system of contracts had deterred the capacity of plantation workers and they chose accommodation and individual acts of passive resistance as a “strategy” appreciating the realities of the plantation system and structures of power in the larger colonial society.¹⁵ Desertion has often been read as a predominant mode of resistance and an individualised strategy of “escape” from the harsh plantation life. Such understandings do not necessarily appreciate that in colonial classificatory modes desertion was employed as an overarching category—which ranged from individual withdrawal of services, to withdrawal of smaller and even some larger groups of workers. The right to private arrest as empowered by the contract and the elaborate system of policing and tracking down the “absconders” also led to a gross underreporting of the phenomena. There also a tendency of plantation managers conflating worker deaths with desertion, as suspected by some officials and also noted by an Indian investigator. This was a well worked out strategy of keeping the mortality rates within the “acceptable” limits.¹⁶

¹⁵ See B. V. Lal, “‘Nonresistance’ on Fiji Plantations: The Fiji Indian Experience, 1879-1920’ in B.V. Lal and D. Munro (ed.) *Plantation Workers, Resistance and Accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993) p. 188; M.J. Murray, ‘White Gold’ or ‘White Blood’? The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina’, 1910-40 and P. Ramasamy, ‘Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malaya’. Both articles in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos. 3&4 (1992) pp.56-59, pp.97-104.

¹⁶ There was also a growing tendency to explain the incidence of desertion as a “racial” phenomenon—where the workers from North Western Provinces and Bihar (upcountry) were

Some recent studies on protest in the nineteenth century Assam plantations, have unsettled a dominant framework—in Indian labour historiography in general and Assam plantation historiography in particular—of an evolutionary transition from individual to collective forms of protest—especially linked with growth of national movement and communist revolution in the twentieth century.¹⁷ However, these explorations have not adequately conceptualised the nature and forms of bargaining and protest in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The framing of protest has oscillated from an understanding of greater politicization in the twentieth century to remaining as contingencies. A more grounded study will reveal how such immediate contingencies were not divorced from the worker solidarities produced in the practices of life and work on plantations. These collective expressions were informing and were informed by workplace organization, patterns of residence and various new occasions on plantations. The production of the “new” occasions was also marked by the “reproduction” of older cultural and religious occasions.

seen to be particularly prone to “bolt”. The annual labour reports from the early 1870s—working on this principle—classified desertions according to the “racial” background of the workers. The labour and health reports of the late 1870s and early 1880s suggested some connections between desertion and new arrivals having low earnings, and also with plantations having a higher rate of mortality. From the late nineteenth century one can see a greater urge in the colonial administration to generate a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. One of the classifications tried to explain this along three criteria—a. nature of contract b. period of residence, c. supposed cause. Rana Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 1985) p. PE-20. *Enquiry at inspections of tea gardens in Assam into the causes of desertions among labourers*. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, February 1904. ASA; *The Bengalee* 27, no.40 (Oct 2, 1886) p.473 cited in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p.7.

¹⁷ This view of “evolution” forms part of many studies. Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1990* (Calcutta, 1997) p.60; Sanat Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry* (Bombay, 1954) p.96; Amalendu Guha, ‘Formation of a Working Class in Assam plantations: A Study in Retrospect’ in North East India Council for Social Science Research (ed.) *Problems of Tea Industry in North East India* (Calcutta, 1981); R. Behal, ‘Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Plantations, 1900-1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 1985). See Chapter 6 for a detailed critique and an analysis of the “incident”.

¹⁸ N. Varma, ‘Coolie Strikes Back: Collective Protest and Action in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam, 1880-1920’, *Indian Historical Review*; R.P. Behal, ‘Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule’ in R. Behal & M van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi); R. Behal, ‘Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture system’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010); Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam’, in M. D. Dubber and L Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007) pp.; E Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010) pp.142-184.

This will require greater attention on plantations not as given homogeneous structures which reproduce uniformly across time and space. The various conceptualizations of plantation as harbingers of modernity, as total institutions, as abstract spaces, have to be firmly located in different historical, geographical and social settings.

A quest for migrant workers and planter strategies of contracting migrant workers (or *coolies*)—emerge as one of the early resolutions of such plantation aspirations in the post-slavery world. These processes were operating in a global framework, but its specific manifestation needs to be carefully mapped. For instance the framing of a special indenture contract (Assam contract) did not do away a general contract—the Master and Servant contract (Act XIII) in Assam plantations. The contract(s) assumed specialised and overlapping forms in its attempts to immobilise workers in a fairly differentiated plantation landscape. The indenture system in Assam based on the historical experience of Assam contract and Assam valley plantations has to be grounded. This differentiation in the practices of indenturing will also need to be situated in the broadening of the identity of the recruiter.

Drawing from range of insights and concerns of labour history, social history, history of work and studies of protest, this study is based on a variety of sources. The colonial archives at the national and local levels will be particular interest and significance. Till 1874, Assam was part of the province of Bengal and the material for an earlier period is drawn from the relevant reports on Bengal. The planter narratives, autobiographies, memoirs are crucial to understand the strategies of management. There is also some investigation of the “scientific” literature dealing with various aspects of plantation work and life of workers. This kind of literature has also to be located in a changing plantation mode where a greater degree of systematization and control was desired. Contemporary periodicals allow us different perspectives about Assam tea gardens—ranging from pro-planter perspectives, an emerging Indian middle class and anti-slavery voices. Some oral narratives recorded in the areas of recruitment and on tea gardens give us new perspective on plantation experience. Again photographs of plantations and visual sources are closely interrogated as historical texts.

The first part situates the emergence of migrant workers and the contract(s) (Assam contract and Act XIII contract) in the changing nature, organization of work and operation scales of plantations in colonial Assam. How did plantations employing contract coolies develop a relationship with recruiters and how does it change over time. The changes in nature of contracts and modes of recruiting from the 1870s (especially through certain legislative initiatives) created the basis for harsher contracts and facilitated massive migration. The trends also occasioned new modes of plantation organisation and intensification of work. These interlocking processes are analysed in the next part through an unpacking of the unpopularity of Assam, the planter concerns and the worker practices of drinking and the notions of customary emerging on plantations. Informed by such understandings, the last part looks at a moment which stimulated the end of contracts. The episode in the twentieth century is carefully discussed to how it encapsulated processes of continuities and change.

The first chapter looks at the context and practices of the introduction of tea production in Assam. It shows how the shift in acquiring the art of making tea to the practices of cultivating tea was framed in the plantation mode. The plantation structure was premised on routines of work and the immobilisation of workers. Such a process was intensified with the emergence of private enterprise in tea and the growing scales of production. A local migrating group was identified as the settled workers required by the plantations. The planter's desire for a shift to migrant workers was rooted in these experiences of work and labour.

The second chapter details the nature of shift to migrant workers and emergence of penal controls. The major line of enquiry is how the strategies of planters backed by colonial state were informed by the responses of workers on the plantations. Here, I look at the nature of the contract regime and how it developed a relationship with the modes of recruitment of workers. This contract regime was reconstituted through a discourse of freedom which translated into legislative action of the colonial state. How were these processes encapsulating planter desires to enforce the contracts and deregulate the modes of recruitment? The different experiences of the contract system and

modes of recruitment in the two planting regions (namely Assam Valley and Surma Valley) of Assam are also explored in this chapter.

The third chapter specifically focuses on the last two decades of nineteenth century. During this period Assam plantations underwent massive expansion of tea acreage, increasing scales of tea, accompanied by large migration of workers under harsher and longer contracts. How were these changes perceived in the recruiting regions? The attempt here is to unpack the category of “unpopularity” which came to be associated with Assam tea gardens.

The fourth chapter takes the problem of alcohol consumption of workers as an entry point to discuss the shifts in the organisation of production in plantations and the emerging forms of work cultures. Such processes also have to be located in the context of a significant demographic shift of plantations and the changing forms of plantations with new strategies of intensification of work.

Extending these enquiries, the fifth chapter explores the forms of negotiation and bargaining on plantation by contrasting the developing notions of customary (*Dustoor*) with the formal notions of contract. Again situated in a changing plantation context, the idea of customary will show spaces of bargaining between managers and workers, which were not entirely effaced by contracts. This will allow us to take this as entry point to explore the practices of work and life on the late nineteenth century plantations.

The last chapter shifts the focus to the 1920s which marked a major crisis in the contract system and its eventual transformation. The massive withdrawal of workers from the plantations during the height of the non-cooperation movement known as Chargola exodus is explored. Through a detailed investigation of the event, both continuities and changes in strategies of work, and patterns of collective forms of protest will be explored.

1. Introduction of Tea, Plantation Production and Early Notions of Work and Worker

1.1 Introduction

This chapter situates the notions and practices of work and labour in the context of the introduction of tea cultivation and the inauguration of plantation mode of production in Assam. The first section tracks the shifting concerns and strategies of the East India Company, interested and engaged in the task of producing the valued commodity in its Indian possessions. Here we analyse the changing objectives of the colonial tea project. After the so called “discovery” of the “indigenous” tea plant in Assam in the early 1830s, it moved beyond an exclusive focus on acquiring the “skilled” art of manipulation of leaves (by Chinese tea makers), to organizing the manual work for clearing the forests and procuring the tea leaves (by local tribes and peasants) growing in the wild. Here we examine how the perceived disinclination of the local Assamese to participate in this project was mapped in the qualitative and essentialised binary discourse of labour—the lazy indigenous contrasting to the industrious imported labour.¹⁹ Such anxieties as we go on to discuss, became more pronounced when the “experimental” tracts made way for a more “regular” plantation mode of production which systematically encountered a recurrent shortage of workers in the formalising period of tea manufacture.

The valorisation of “imported labour”—as the next sections will discuss—hinged on the assumption of them donning the mantle of the committed and settled workers on plantations, in contrast to the local tribal and peasant groups decried of being perpetually entrapped in the agricultural cycles and their opium smoking habits. The identification of outsider/imported labour was however fluid at this stage, where Kacharis—an ethnic group within the province, and the extremely amorphous category of “Bengalis” from outside

¹⁹ The cultural construction of lazy native was critical to the ideology of colonial capitalism in several contexts. Alatas shows how the reluctance of the Malays, Indonesians and Filipinos to participate in the colonial economy was read through the stereotype of the “lazy native” in these discourses. S.H. Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism*. (London, 1977).

the province, “settled” and worked on the plantations of the pioneer tea company—the Assam Company.²⁰

The later sections of the chapter will make a case that it was not until the late 1850s that *coolie*—the much celebrated labour category considered ideal for plantations—was employed to designate the ‘imported labour from outside the province’ in the colonial-capitalist discourses on Assam. Now the referents were the social and regional groups travelling to the overseas plantation colonies as indentured labour. They were now reckoned to be indispensable for accomplishing the amplified labour needs of an industry, expanding much beyond a few companies in select localities of Assam.

The workers demanded from outside the province were not just limited to provide remedy for the short numbers. Tea *coolies* for plantations were ideally imagined to be composed of familial and kin members incessantly travelling as groups. Apart from serving the purpose of being “fixed” and “bound” in/as structures of families, the proposition encapsulated the potential of labour participation of families in accomplishing the differentiated and specialised nature of work in the functioning plantations—organised along the axes of gender and age. The interest of this chapter in tracing and interrogating this transition to migrant workers is also to underline the limits of the strategies of plantation capital and policies of the colonial state in dislocating, immobilising, and depoliticising the local society.

1.2 Discovery of Tea and the Skills of Chinese Work

The idea of the ‘introduction of tea cultivation’ in the newly acquired possessions of East India Company in the early part of nineteenth century was tied to larger geopolitical, commercial and scientific developments; where uncertainties of commercial relations with China, the profitability of the tea trade and the partially successful propagation of the plant in other parts of the globe, made the proposition not only urgent and lucrative, but increasingly

²⁰ The category of Bengali was used for workers travelling from Bengal to various inland and overseas destinations. See Chapter 2 for details.

feasible.²¹ The immediate point of consideration in this regard—as indicated in the influential minute by the Governor General of India, William Bentinck—was to map, assess and ascertain the various configurations of soil and climate within their vast and diverse possessions in the subcontinent, which could offer the precise combination in which the ‘China plant’ could flourish to an extent to render it commercially viable for private speculation. This would then necessitate, as he argued, ‘concerted measures for obtaining the genuine plant, and the actual cultivator’. This underscored at the very outset that the notions of not only the plant and its habitat but also the knowledge and art of its manipulation was patently Chinese.²² A Tea Committee was duly constituted in February 1834, as the institutional and scientific framework to carry out the “experiment” of exploring and recommending the measures for introduction of tea plant in India.²³

The essential task of the Tea Committee for initiating measures for the “introduction” of tea was apparently complicated by the reports of “discovery” of tea in Assam. These reports confirmed tea to be ‘beyond all doubt indigenous’, having received letters and conclusive evidence from the

²¹ The introduction of plants in the colonised world was a long drawn out process. The Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires in the New World, Africa and Asia had involved in “transaction” and “circulation” of various plants. A more formalised strategy of plant introduction and plantation cultivation was an outcome of a strategy and policy of the colonial empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. P. D. Curtin, *The rise and fall of the plantation complex: essays in Atlantic history* (Cambridge, 1998); J. Crawford, ‘On the History and Migration of Cultivated Plants Producing Coffee, Tea, Cocoa, etc.’ *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 7 (1869) pp.197-206; D.R. Headrick, ‘Botany, Chemistry, and Tropical Development’ *Journal of World History* 7, no. 1 (1996).

²² Minute by the Governor-General of India, 24th January 1834 in *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant within the British Possessions in India* (British Parliamentary Papers, 1839) pp.5-6. Hereafter, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

²³ The Tea Committee in its inaugural statement agreed to idea of the necessity of the right (read Chinese) combination of soil and climate for any significant success of its introduction; but admitted that ‘due to lack of statistical inquiries directed to this particular subject’, it knew ‘too little to form an accurate comparison with the tea districts of China’ and India. On a preliminary and extremely limited information, they speculated that the lower hills and valleys of Himalayas, the eastern frontier and the Nilgiris and the mountain tracts in southern and Central India was most likely to fit the bill or in other words resembled the tea countries in China. Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 15th March 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.16. Also see N. Wallich, Observations on the Cultivation of the Tea Plant for Commercial Purposes, in the mountainous parts of Hindustan in *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

administrative-in-charge of the province Captain Jenkins and his subordinate Lt Charlton. Underlining the significance of the occasion, the Committee waxed eloquent: ‘by far [it is] the most important and valuable discovery that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural and commercial resources of this empire’.²⁴ This, however, did not discourage the Committee and its informants to persist in invoking China tea (the genuine) in validating the credentials of the Assam tea (the indigenous).²⁵ The Committee formally constituted a scientific deputation to map, verify and scientifically assess the claims and nature of Assam tea.²⁶ In a recent study, Jayeeta Sharma argues that the trope of “wildness” informed the colonial scientific discourses in characterising the tea plant found in Assam and also the practices of its manipulation observed among the local tribes.²⁷ The colonial civilising mission was sought to be realised through the introduction of “civilized” Chinese tea maker/cultivator and domesticating the “wild” Assam plant by confinement and cultivation.²⁸

²⁴ Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 24th December 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.32-33.

²⁵ The committee referred to the place of “discovery” (one month’s march from Suddya and Beesa) ‘to be adjoining the Chinese frontier province of Yunan’. Captain Jenkins detailing the geography of the region indicated that the mountainous region which divides Assam and Cachar to have ‘a direct continuation passing into China into the tea countries of Sechuan and Yunan’ and that the ‘northern bend in the latitude of Suddya meets a branch of the snowy mountains (the place considered ideal for tea growing in China)’. While Captain Charlton narrated his interactions with couple of natives from the Chinese province of Yunan who assured him that the tea tree growing near Suddya exactly resembled the species they had there and that there can be ‘no doubt of its being bona fide tea’. Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 24th December 1834; F Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary of the Committee of Tea Culture, 7th May 1834; Letter from Lt Charlton to Captain Jenkins, 17th May 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.32-36.

²⁶ Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 13th March 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.15.

²⁷ The Singphos and Kamtees were in the habit of drinking an infusion. This was similar to the procedure that was in use with Burmese to prepare tea. J. Sharma, ‘British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43 no.4 (2006); *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.34-35.

²⁸ Naturalist worked with a different conception of science. Domestication effected changes in the organism, which were partly inherited and intensified these changes by selection during many generations. J. Sharma, ‘British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43 no. 4 (2006). For a general discussion on colonialism as a

The necessity of introducing Chinese tea makers revealed the early anxieties about work and workers in achieving the desired objective of producing tea in India. The work, unlike the later *coolie* work on plantations, was portrayed as “skilled”, requiring the “true” yet “jealously guarded” art of processing leaves to produce black and green tea, known only to the Chinese. Jenkins, the administrative head of Assam, requested the scientific deputation for Assam to be accompanied with Chinamen. He expected them to travel through Burma into Yunan to forge and activate networks of contact and facilitate the flows of existing knowledge about tea manufacture.²⁹ The Tea Committee issued a fresh directive to its representative who had returned from China with tea seeds to undertake another trip to recruit qualified Chinamen, who could oversee and supervise the cultivation and manufacture of tea. This, they contented, was the key to the ‘successful introduction of tea culture within the British territories’.³⁰

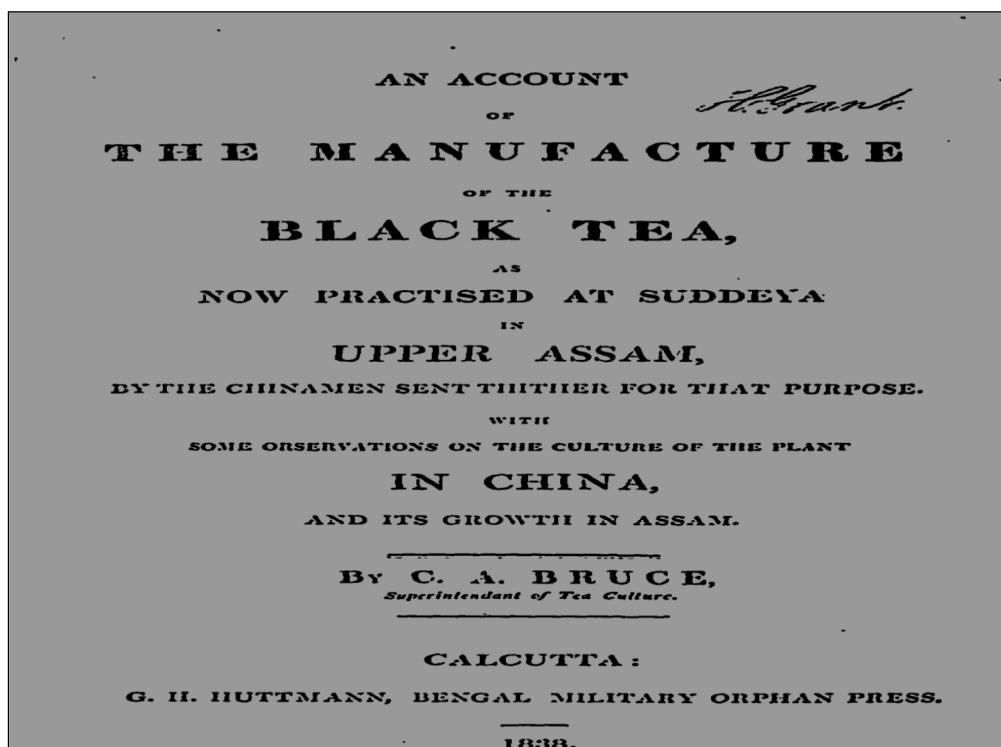
Chinese tea makers were not easy to procure and also came at a substantial cost. For instance, the inaugural batches of Chinese tea makers landing in Assam in the late 1830s came under great duress, loss of life and heavy price. Their presence, however, quickly raised hopes among the administrative/scientific circles that the valued art of tea making could now be passed on to the colonised natives. They believed that the tea enterprise would

civilising mission, see M. Mann and H. Fischer-Tine, *Colonialism as a Civilising Mission* (London, 2004).

²⁹ Jenkins further urged the government to take active measures in facilitating and stimulating the trade links between Ava (Burma) and Assam in the hope of attracting Chinese cultivators to reclaim what he described as the wild wastes of Suddya. The scheme of getting the Chinese cultivators through the overland route than directly from China met with the Committee’s approval because of its cost effectiveness, but the scheme was unlikely to bear immediate results. F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary of the Tea Committee, 6th January, 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the cultivation of the Tea Plant within the British Possessions in India* p.37.

³⁰ Such a tendency was also evident from Dutch Trading Company (*Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij*) sending an employee between the years 1827 and 1833, who travelled around six times to China in order to get the necessary data on cultivation and manufacture, and to fetch skilled Chinese labourers with their tools. The Dutch Government even ordered seeds from Japan through the intermediary, the physician F.V. Siebold in 1825. The first tea gardens were laid out in December 1835. Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 18th September 1835; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Members of the Tea Committee, 21st September 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.46-47; *Bulletin Du Jardin Botanique*, 1 no.4, (1919) p.196.

in due course of time liberate itself from the shackles of Chinese skilled workers.³¹ Operating along those lines, Robert Bruce decided to employ his entire native staff as apprentices to the Chinese tea makers.³² To further secure this valued knowledge, he diligently recorded and graphically illustrated the earliest process of manufacture employed by the Chinese, which was published in 1838 as *An Account of Manufacture of the Black Tea as Now Practised at Suddeya in Upper Assam*.³³



³¹ Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to Government, 12th January 1837; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to the Tea Committee, 13th March 1837; N Wallich to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 30th November 1837. Robert Fortune, the incharge of the British tea enterprise in the North Western provinces also regarded the importation of Chinese manipulators at exorbitant wages as a 'temporary measure', the long term objective being the 'instruction of the natives'. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.87-94; *Report upon the Tea Plantations of Deyra, Kumaon and Gurhwal by Robert Fortune, 6th September 1851*, Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces (Agra, 1855).

³² R Bruce to Jenkins, 20th Dec 1836 *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

³³ A recent study argues this to be one of the early examples of expatriation for work purposes in the context of a transfer of technology from an ancient civilization to a modern colony. These expatriate craftsmen were sought after both for their expertise in the tea-making process and for their ability to train others, particularly the local Assamese. Few of the first group of Chinese tea cultivators and processors who moved to Assam in 1837 lasted the full three years of their contract. A. L Pichon, *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong, 1827-1843* (Oxford, 2006).

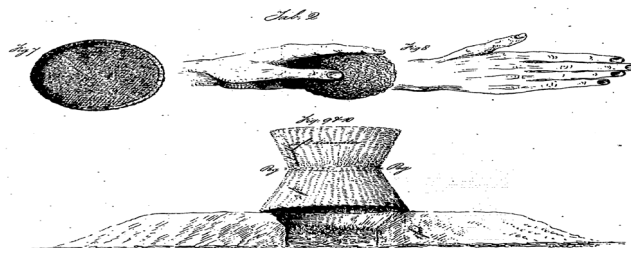


Fig 1.1: Manual and illustration on tea manufacture in Assam, 1838.³⁴

The transfer of skills from the civilised to the colonised was one of diminishing returns, especially in terms of the wages paid. The trained native black tea maker got only nine percent of what was paid to the Chinese counterpart, while the native green tea maker barely received a third of the monthly remuneration of the Chinese colleague.

1.3 Framing Plantations and encounters with the Lazy Native Worker

Alongside the acquaintance with the civilising methods of the Chinese tea maker/cultivator, simultaneous attempts were underway to “civilise” the wild Assam Plant. By the middle of 1836, the botanical expert of the deputation Nathan Wallich, having extensively travelled, surveyed and mapped the wild sites in the province, proposed urgent measures for taking possession of the “natural” tea forests.³⁵ Such an idea was mooted in the contention that the forests holding the valuable plant of potential exploitation, was at the time exposed to the ravages of the nature, native and beast. In what could be described as “proto-plantations” and containing the germs of a prolonged but contested process of dispossession of the forest commons. The creation and systematisation of enclaves was proposed by demarcating, clearing and

³⁴ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce of the tea plantations in Assam* (Calcutta, 1839).

³⁵ The area of tea in Upper Assam was located in three regions namely Singpho country (Kojoo, Niggroo); Muttock country (Nuddoa and Tingree) and Gabroo Hills. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.46-47.

guarding these sites.³⁶ This found a clearer expression in a detailed order from the central administration instructing the local bureaucracy to take immediate steps to that effect:

1st. To obtain by purchase or otherwise tracts of forests in the Singpho, Muttock, and Gubroo Hills

2nd. That the tracts be placed under a systematic course of management, for establishing tea plantations

3rd. That the Tracts be protected, by a strong fence, from encroachment and depredation of man and beast

4th. That labourers be entertained to dig and level the ground, and drain lands at places where there is fear of severe flooding

5th. That Chowkidars be hired to guard the tracts, to prevent theft of plants and seed.³⁷

To realise the desire of taming the forests containing the wild tea into demarcated and ordered “plantations”, the company administration was not in a position to explicitly pursue a policy of acquisition, dispossession and direct control. They largely depended on personal persuasion, inducement, and at times exaggerated and even concocted promises to solicit valued local information and support.³⁸ Even though he lacked the requisite scientific

³⁶ This was in further agreement with Wallich’s scientific idea that the wild Assam plant, when placed in circumstances as nearly as possible resembling those in which the cultivated/civilized China plant should yield the best results. At the same time, to conclusively show the feasibility of producing tea in Assam for commercial purposes, for which the committee was explicitly formed, Jenkins strongly recommended that the tea cannot exclusively be picked from the wild and had to be put through the test of cultivation (civilization)—both native and imported. Further elaborating the proposed structure and nature of the “proto-plantations”, he recommended that an appropriate site should be decided (with the Chinese expertise) and the cultivation undertaken in the right earnest. He reassured the government that the whole experiment cannot be too burdensome as the only major expense being the remuneration of European superintendence and the Chinese planters, as the land can be acquired at almost no cost and *coolies* for what he described as ‘little additional charge’. Seeds which arrived from China were sown in Calcutta early in 1835, and the plantlets, 42,000 in number, distributed. Assam and the Himalayan Mountains (Kumaon, Dehra Doon, North West Provinces) got 20,000 each. The remainders 2,000 were transported to Madras. N. Wallich to Francis Jenkins, 15th March 1836, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.66. For more details see D. Arnold, ‘Plant capitalism and company science: the Indian career of Nathaniel Wallich’ *Modern Asian Studies* 42 no. 5 (2008) pp.899-928.

³⁷ Bruce complained about many tracts being cut down in “ignorance” by the natives, to make room for their rice field and firewood. Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Captain Jenkins, 23rd May, 1836, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp.68-69.

³⁸ For example, the sites at Gubroo hills under the native chief (Raja Purandar Singh) was partially brought under Company’s possession on assurances that the Chinese instructor of tea cultivation and manufacture would train the chief’s men, who still retained possession of half

qualification and training, the elevation of Robert Bruce as the British superintendent of “tea forests” in Assam, was on account of his acquaintance with the local language, custom and terrain and his proven abilities in forging ties with the local groups.³⁹

The area of tea exploration operation in the Singpho country was still tenuously linked to the deepening influence and presence of the Company in the province. The resident tribes of the region, from whom Bruce got hold of the first tea plants, exhibited a degree of reluctance towards the project of clearing the forests.⁴⁰ In a letter addressed to Jenkins, Bruce mentioned the earliest ‘resistance’ of the natives to the labour demands of the tea experiment. He lamented that the Singphos ‘work how and when they please’ and they made it clear to him that ‘they would not clear the jungle when it grows’. After largely unsuccessful attempt to lure their chiefs with guns and opium, Bruce remarked:

Singpho country cannot be available (for tea), unless we import men to make the Singphos more industrious...these men will not work for any long as they have sufficient opium and rice...as long as coolies can get four rupees per mensem at Suddeya, they will never go to Singphos (territory) for that sum.⁴¹

The demands for imported labour to compel the natives to work, underscored the early attempts to favourably alter the local labour supply situation. A sufficient supply of the chief staple (rice) and the drug of preference (opium) was read as the condition and cause for the native’s disinclination to labour.

of the hills. The chief of Tingree in the Muttok country initially resisted to the overtures of the company authorities, but later came around the issue and even actively supported with men and material. This was on the understanding that the company would leave the production and manufacture of tea in his control, after the successful execution of the experiment. Captain Jenkins to N. Wallich, 5th May 1836; Major White to Lt. Millar, 30th March 1836; Lt Millar to Major White, 19th April 1836; R Bruce to Lt. Millar, 14th April 1836; Raja Purandar Sing to Major White, 13th April 1836; Bruce to F. Jenkins, 1st October 1836. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 69-71, 84.

³⁹ N. Wallich to Francis Jenkins, 15th March 1836; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Captain Jenkins, 23rd May, 1836. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.66, pp.68-69.

⁴⁰ Singphos are divided into twelve principal tribes, each having its own chief or *Gaum*. Bisa Gaum had an arrangement to become the ‘organ of communication’ with other chiefs at a monthly allowance of fifty rupees and furnished a contingent of hundred men. J. McCosh, *Topography of Assam* (Calcutta, 1837) p.151.

⁴¹ C.A. Bruce, Superintendent of Tea to Captain Jenkins, 10th February, 1837. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.92.

This view failed to take into account that the wages on offer (between 3 and 4 rupees) were an inadequate inducement to work in the tortuous and trying jungle terrain. Nevertheless, the instances of the reluctance caught the attention of the administrative chief of the province and he raised this issue in a correspondence with a member of the Tea Committee:

...For this evil (native labour) it will not be difficult to find a remedy, I hope, when the tea becomes to be largely worked by encouraging the emigration of more industrious races from Chota Nagpur, or elsewhere; but in the present state of our preparations, in regard to the manufacture of tea, it does not appear immediately necessary to offer any particular suggestions.⁴²

Jenkins agreed with the view of the necessity of imported labour and particularly referred to the facilitation of emigration of the ‘more industrious races of Chota Nagpur or elsewhere’ as a potential remedy. This was an apparent allusion to the “labour solution” debates of the 1830s and the formalisation of the *coolie* labour system for overseas plantations, especially recruiting “races” from Chota Nagpur in eastern India. But he maintained that the present incipient stage of experimental operation in Assam did not justify such an organised measure.⁴³

1.4 Experimental Plantations and the search for Immobilised Worker

The operationalisation of the experimental plantation, with the arrival of the Chinese tea makers, starkly revealed the logistical inputs, work practices and labour integral to an effective functioning of a plantation. This went beyond a mere technical know-how of the methods of manufacturing tea—black and green. By that time, more than a hundred “natural” tea sites had been already identified and earmarked and the person in charge (Bruce) boasted of having enough seed and seedlings to ‘plant whole of Assam’.⁴⁴ However, a meagre

⁴² Bruce procured around 17,000 plants for his “nurseries” in Suddya from the Muttock and received further supplies of 16,000 China plants in 1837 from which the first tea was produced. Captain Jenkins to N. Wallich, 20th February, 1837. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.92.

⁴³ *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.34.

⁴⁴ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.3.

working force at his disposal meant that only five of these tracts could be made operational.⁴⁵ It was not just a matter of numbers, but also of permanence and stability with regard to the working force which was proving to be a stumbling block. Apart from his proposal of getting more tea makers with assistants (one tea maker with six assistants for each tract), Bruce noted the indispensability of fixed workers (thirty for each tract), especially pluckers of tea leaves.⁴⁶ A cursory glance at the statistics of the working staff of the experimental stations (Table 1.1) reveals that an overwhelming majority of the permanent employees were delegated tasks in the manufacturing/manipulation of tea leaves (tea makers), with the rest engaged in construction (carpenters, sawyers), packaging (canister maker) and transport of tea (*Mahouts*).

	Number	Wages
Superintendent	1	500-0-0
1 st Assistant	1	100-0-0
2 nd Assistant	1	70-0-0
Chinese Black Tea Maker	1	55-11-6
Asst Chinese Black Tea Maker	1	11-1-6
Chinese Tea Box Maker	1	45-0-0
Chinese Interpreter	1	45-0-0
Chinese Tea Box maker	1	15-8-6
Chinese Green	2	15-8-6

⁴⁵ The manufacturing operations could not be carried out at each and every individual site. Leaves plucked, sometimes from great distances, had to be brought at two centrally located sites where the Chinese tea makers resided and worked with native assistance. The quality of the leaves was seriously compromised due to delay in transfer (causing early fermentation) and the damage caused to them due to the excessive amount being carried in every individual transfer. R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.29.

⁴⁶ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) pp.24-25

Tea maker		
Chinese Tea Box maker	1	33-4-6
Chinese Lead Canister Maker	1	22-3-0
Native Black Tea maker	24	5-0-0
Native Green Tea maker	12	5-0-0
Native Carpenter	1	4-0-0
Coolie Sardar	1	10-0-0
Mahout	4	6-0-0
Mahout mates	4	4-0-0
Sawyers	4	4-0-0
Dak runners	2	3-8-0
Duffadars	4	3-0-0

Table 1.1: Employees of the 'Experimental Plantations' in Upper Assam, 1840.⁴⁷

Agricultural work, at this stage comprised primarily of clearing of jungle and plucking of leaves. The bulk of leaves were still plucked from the wild, because of the limited state of cultivation and immature seedlings on the “experimental” plantations. The work was carried out by locally obtained hands procured through the agency of local labour contractors and the work supervised through the lone supervisor (*coolie sardar*), employed in the ranks.⁴⁸ Apart from not having any pluckers on the staff list, there was rarely any regularity in this work. Bruce regretted about ‘seldom getting hold of the same pluckers two seasons running’.⁴⁹ This had a bearing on the outturn of

⁴⁷ R Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.12

⁴⁸ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.14.

⁴⁹ There was also a difference in dimensions of bushes in Assam in comparison to China as it was almost double its size. Bruce further observed that unlike the obvious perception, plucking

plantations, as experience strongly suggested, as regular pluckers were more “efficient” and could pluck twice as fast in comparison to the new recruits. Reflecting on the challenges of running a “proto plantation” and speculating on the nature of the working force desired, Bruce remarked:

This difficulty (of not having regular workers) will be removed when we get regular people attached to the Plantations; or when the natives of these parts become more fixed and settled in their habitations, and do not move off by whole villages from one place to another...when the aversion they have throughout Assam to taking service for payment, has been overcome...there is a gradual change taking place in the minds of the labouring class of people, or *coolies*; for occasionally some good able-bodied men come forward for employment... [During] cold season two or three hundred can be collected; but as soon as rains set in, all those that have no bonds, or are not involved in debt, go off to their cultivations, at the very time when our Tea operations commence...as long as things continue in this state, the price of Tea will be high.⁵⁰

Bruce underlined that the future profitability of a private tea enterprise in Assam and its competitiveness with the Chinese tea hinged on the ability of mobilising groups who would remain regular/attached to plantations. Here a degree of control could be exercised over their life and labour. Though enough working hands could be patched together in the non-agricultural season, the numbers dwindled dramatically with the advent of the rains and the commencement of the agricultural season. Bruce expressed his inability in exercising any substantial “influence” on the local society, apart from a handful of individuals immobilised through bonds and debts. He characterised this labour situation as a particular manifestation of the general unsettled state of the local society and a deep seated popular prejudice against wage-work. He particularly singled out the so called “opium mania” for the depopulation, degeneration and general condition of laziness of the Assamese society and proposed an immediate ban on it:

Opium mania, that dreadful plague which has depopulated this beautiful country, turned it into a land of wild beasts, with which it is overrun, and has degenerated the Assamese, from a fine race of people, to the most abject, servile, crafty, and demoralized race in India.⁵¹

was not ‘a very easy and light employment’ as the pluckers had to stand in an upright position for hours in a difficult terrain to gather the leaves often causing swelling in their legs. R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.21.

⁵⁰ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.21.

⁵¹ R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.14

Bruce reiterated Jenkins's solution of the imported worker/ "superior race" of labourers' presuming their attachment/settlement to the plantation would ensure a degree of control desired over their labour. This proposition of imported labour was portrayed by him in fairly glowing terms—as a set of people 'growing up for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild beasts and to plant and cultivate the luxury of the world'. Such an attachment, he reasoned, could serve another vital purpose of 'encouraging their women and children to do the same—in plucking and sorting leaves'. His interactions with the local groups had convinced him that they 'will not permit their women to come into the Tea gardens'.⁵² The distinctive nature of the plantation workforce (of family labour rather than just male workers) and the centrality of female and child labour to the work process was articulated in the "formative" stage of the Assam plantations.

1.5 Privatising the discovery and the emergence of the Assam Company

These operational setbacks of the tea experiment could not dampen the excitement and hysteria generated by the news of the "discovery" of tea in Assam, which was receiving rave reviews in contemporary British press. These reactions reflected a sense of anticipation about the evident feasibility of producing tea within the bounds of the Empire, threatening to end the long-standing Chinese monopoly of the drink. This mood was eloquently articulated in a contemporary treatise on the subject:

Discovery (of tea) has been made of no less importance than that the hand of Nature has planted the shrub within the bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain: a discovery which must materially influence the destinies of nations; it must change the employment of a vast number of individuals; it must divert the tide of commerce, and awaken to agricultural industry the dormant energies of a mighty country.⁵³

The enthusiasm reached a crescendo when the samples of tea produced in the experimental plantations and packaged in around ninety odd chests were forwarded to the tea brokers and dealers of London in 1838. The much

⁵² R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) pp.14-15.

⁵³ W. Sigmond, *Tea its Medicinal Efforts and Moral* (London, 1839) p.3.

publicised ‘First Public Sale’ in the London’s tea market—Mincing Lane, drew substantial public interest and high prices in the market. “Competent judges” were that not only the plant but also the finished product was ‘scarcely to be distinguished from China Tea’.⁵⁴

Having conducted the experiment of cultivation, manufacture and marketability of Assam tea, the East India Company now found itself in the position to realise the founding objective of privatising the venture. Such an idea was ‘popularised’ by the exaggerated pronouncements from “authorities” and “experts” on the ground, whipping up the jubilant mood of the British public and market basking in the success of the “discovery” of tea in the Empire.⁵⁵ Bruce’s speculative commentary on the potentialities of transforming Assam into ‘one big tea garden’, and Jenkins’ far-fetched assertion regarding the ‘extent of discovery’ which justified an ‘immediate commencement of manufacture at the largest scale by capitalists’, were generally read as informed opinions on the feasibility and profitability of large scale investments of private capital, in the contemporary British journals, trade magazines and information manuals. A passage from the topographical/scientific survey of the province, quoted generously in these publications, read more like an “infomercial” targeting the potential European settler, colonizer and entrepreneur:

Assam’s climate is cold, healthy, and congenial to European constitutions; it’s numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust and masses of the solid metal; it’s mountains are pregnant with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea, growing wild and luxuriantly; and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes, that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee, and sugar, over an extent of many hundred miles.⁵⁶

The relevance of work and workers to fulfil such aspirations remained marginal to these discussions. The anxiety (about work and labour), intermittently surfacing in Bruce’s otherwise optimistic rendition of the functioning plantations in Assam, were apparently resolved by the specific solutions he offered—ban of opium, importation of labour and use of

⁵⁴ *Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam* (London, 1839) p.3.

⁵⁵ *Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam* (London, 1839) p.10.

⁵⁶ J. McCosh *Topography of Assam* (Calcutta, 1837) p.133.

machinery. It was widely held that with the sustained injection of British capital and enterprise, tea would become profitable enough to induce the natives from the locality and the overpopulated regions of India to seek remunerative employment on Assam plantations. A common theme underlining these assertions was a belief in the transformative/civilizing potential of British capital, technology and enterprise in inculcating values of industry to the native and simultaneously revolutionising the processes of work and production.⁵⁷

A climate of market frenzy and hopes of fabulous profits culminated in the floating of a joint stock company, Assam Company in London with the explicit intention to acquire the experimental plantations with related establishment and undertake the production of tea for export to the British market.⁵⁸ The most decisive incentive and benefit that the colonial state offered to private capital was the institution of the Wasteland Acts. This rendered vast stretches of land—an important “factor of production”—available at throwaway rates in the districts of Upper Assam (Lakhimpur and Sibsagar). The Assam Company initially concentrated their activities in these districts, dividing the operations into three divisions (Northern, Southern and Eastern) and headquartered at a place called Nazira. Yet a characteristic nature of the joint stock companies (like Assam Company), with a decisive control over operation and expenditure with the board of directors and shareholders, removed from the scene of production and often determined by profit and fluctuations of the markets, had a significant bearing in conditioning the nature of management and work on the plantations.

⁵⁷ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of these themes in a different context.

⁵⁸ The “excitement” in this project among the mercantile houses trading with India and the leading firms in the tea trade can be gauged from the fact that all the shares were picked up before any public notice of it had appeared. Assam Company was not the lone player in the field. European and Indian men of “capital and repute” in Calcutta had already formed the Bengal Tea Association with a similar intention. The Bengal organisation realising the “junction of interests” agreed to merge under the banner of Assam Company, with offices in London and Calcutta. The monopolistic streak of Assam Company went beyond a mutually beneficial settlement with an emerging rival. They negotiated to acquire two third of the existing plantations of the East India Company, regretting not to possess the remaining one third on the argument that the emerging “competition” could be detrimental to a “pioneering” enterprise. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.37.

The company at the outset vigorously pursued a policy of expansion of operation, investment in the modes of transport and establishment of infrastructure, but continued the existing practices of agricultural work and manufacturing, having inherited a majority of the personnel involved in the “experimental” stage.⁵⁹ Unlike the limited scope and intention of the experimental stage, the Assam Company could not rely on collecting the leaves from the wild. They took sustained measures to systematically cultivate the plant. Bruce had earlier demonstrated with some success that tea plants flourished when the forests were burnt down and the land hoed to be made fit for cultivation. Much of this jungle clearing and hoeing work, like in the experimental plantation, was done in the cold season by locals procured through the prevalent “Gang system”.⁶⁰

Assam Company plantations also experienced a severe “crisis” of workers during the agricultural season. The situation posed grave consequences, as it not only meant a fall in the quantity of the leaves plucked, but also due to lack of sustained tending and weeding, the cleared land often fell into disuse. There was a glaring discrepancy in the area of clearance and the land actually put under cultivation and regularly tended. In 1842, only two hundred odd acres of land was under cultivation out of more than six hundred fifty acres cleared in northern and eastern divisions. Again in 1843, around two thousand five hundred acres cleared land in southern division was left unattended due to “insufficient” supplies of labour.⁶¹ Internal enquiries into the workings of the

⁵⁹ Responding to the concerns of tea makers and working hand on the experimental plantations, the Assam Company went overdrive with recruitment even before the actual transfer of establishments in Assam to the Company. The idea of tea makers hinged on getting the Chinese and they requisitioned to companies and private individuals in Singapore and Penang. Batches of Chinese were despatched from November 1839 till the end of 1840. The Chinese experiment was described by London Board in 7th May 1841. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.56.

⁶⁰ K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839-1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986).

⁶¹ The early plantation practice in Assam had established that the period from March to October to be the manufacturing season when the ground had to be hoed once every two months which believed to have an influence on the capacity of the plants to bear leaves and therefore the overall outturn of the tract. Again when the trees flush, the young leaves should be plucked and even a delay of a day made it ‘deteriorate and unfit for manufacture’. R Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p.21.

Company recommended discontinuation of cultivation in the northern and eastern division and concentrate efforts on select tracts in the southern division. Even a system of cultivation by local Assamese peasants through advances was mooted, where the Company would concentrate exclusively on manufacture.

The necessity of “imported” labour, which can be “fixed” to plantation, became very evident from the early stage of plantation cultivation. Kacharis, a “mobile” tribal group from the contiguous districts of Nowgong and Darrang and circulating in gangs in these districts were engaged in the company’s gardens, partially fulfilling the demands for ‘regular people attached to the plantations’.⁶² Their crucial and growing presence was mentioned in an early report of the company:

In the manufacturing season when the hands are insufficient to pluck the leaves which in short time become too ripe for manufacture and are lost. Endeavours are being made to send up gangs of Kachari...under agreement to serve for a fixed term.⁶³

This presence of local groups like the Kacharis, who could be “settled” through agreements and advances, was already acknowledged by some Europeans who had visited Assam through Bengal in search of “profitable” investments. One such speculator writing in 1835 to the Chief Commissioner of the province gave an extremely favourable impression about the Kacharis and their significance to any European enterprise in the province:

Custom in the country (Assam) which would prove highly advantageous to a European manufacturer, giving themselves out in bondage for a certain time on receiving a small sum. There is only their food to furnish...*Cacharee* families may be engaged for 10 and 15 rupees for four or five years; their women and children work on the fields.⁶⁴

1.6 Early Plantation enterprise and Kachari as the Ideal Worker

⁶² *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

⁶³ Report of Calcutta Board of Assam Company for the year 1840-1841. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.386.

⁶⁴ Hugon to Captain Jenkins, 15th April, 1835. *Transactions of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India*, 2, 1836 p.166.

The “internal “migrant” groups like the Kacharis were potentially appropriate for the labour demands of the Assam plantations. Their mere presence did not satisfactorily answer certain key issues: Were the problems of fixing workers permanently resolved? Did Kacharis become the “ideal workers” of the Assam plantation? Were the early Assam planters successful in immobilising them under trying conditions of life and remuneration?

It is pertinent here to briefly indicate the geographical setting and nature of the early plantations in Upper Assam. These plantations mostly were dispersed clearings in the middle of vast stretches of forest and often at the limits of human habitation, local markets and the networks of transport and communication. Such a fragile living situation obliged the management to arrange food provisions, especially rice for the resident labour population.⁶⁵ On some plantations certain portions of land was set aside for the cultivation of food grains and vegetables. A regular provision of rice often became a subject of contention between Kachari labour and the local management. In July 1843, the superintendent of the southern division expressed his inability in retaining Kacharis because of the failing supplies. Such a situation recurred again in 1845 in the Eastern and northern divisions. Groups of Kachari workers left work due to “insufficient provisions”. In 1846, the Directors in response to a prolonged lean phase in the Company initiated some efforts to economise and decided to terminate the “rice benefit”. The local superintendents in Assam took strong exceptions to such moves on the fear that it could lead to imminent Kachari backlash.⁶⁶

The Kacharis commitment to the Company’s plantations was also contingent on the wages on offer. A reduction and delay in payment caused discontent, work stoppages and even “strikes”. The management’s decision to “hold” the payment or keep a part of the due amount was often a deliberate strategy to “bind” the Kacharis. This often proved counterproductive. In the year 1848,

⁶⁵ At the commencement of its operation the Company was importing rice from Bengal (Pabna and Rungpur) and later from the district of Darrang. But it had to supply through its own boats. H.A. Antrobus, *Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.387.

⁶⁶ K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839-1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p.M-39

Kacharis on a Company's factory (Satsoeh) refused a month's pay, which was nearly three months' in arrears and struck work. Their interruption continued for a few days and they resumed work only after the superintendent gave a written assurance of future payment within fifteen days. There is also evidence of some articulated resentment at times regarding the discriminatory wages paid to the imported Bengali labour. In the year 1846, around two hundred fifty Kacharis left the Company's gardens for being paid less than their Bengali counterparts.⁶⁷

In the colonial-capitalist narratives, Bengalis alluded to a "generic" rather than an "ethnic" category. This overarching description incorporated a variety of individuals and groups being recruited in the province of Bengal, coming from varied social and regional background. This source of recruitment assumed some importance in the Assam Company's operations.⁶⁸ The "labour agents" of the company conducting their operations in Bengal, tapped into the labour market of agricultural workers, seasonal migrants and the developing indentured labour market for the overseas colonies.⁶⁹ The elementary infrastructure of travel and communication, prohibitive costs of recruitment and the indifferent results of the company recruiters made this source unreliable, expensive and highly inadequate to the demands of the "fixed" workers. Yet the Bengali "imported" labour was purposefully sustained as the countervailing factor to the Kacharis throughout the early period. After the bitter experience of the 1848 strike, the Superintendent of Assam Company urged the Calcutta Board that the Kacharis should not be depended upon and a more sustained effort be made to get Bengalis.⁷⁰ A relatively successful

⁶⁷ K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839-1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p.M-39

⁶⁸ See Chapter 2 for more details.

⁶⁹ By the end of 1839, Assam company had eight Europeans recruiters stationed in Bengal. . Campbell (Midnapur), C.T. Reeves (Chittagong), W.S. Stewart (Hazaribagh), F.T. Bandant and J. George (Dacca), W.H.K. Sweetland (Bowsing), H. Busch (Rangpur) and T. Pickett (Mymensingh). They received a commission of Rs. 2 per head for every man landed, Rs 1 for women and children, and Rs 150 monthly for their maintenance. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.384.

⁷⁰ *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

recruiting operation in Bengal the following year resulted in a further cut of wages of the Kacharis.

There was another parallel trend of Kacharis seeking employment in other European enterprises coming up in the period. For instance, the Assam Coal and Timber Company operating in Naga Hills in the north eastern frontier opened up other opportunities to the Kacharis in late 1840s. There were partially successful attempts by the management of Assam Company to mutually agree with the new enterprise against “enticement” of labour. The discourse of enticement and strategic moves to interfere with the emerging market of labour was evident from the early stages of plantation enterprise in Assam.

The depressed condition of the pioneer tea company, from the early 1850s, was partially halted and reversed through a combined strategy of rationalised practices of business, management of labour and methods of cultivation on the plantations. Certain concerned opinions had earlier expressed surprise that with such “low rate” of wages being paid to the workers (Rs 5 for the leaf manipulators and Rs. 3 for *coolies*), the Assam Company should be embroiled in any serious financial or operational difficulties. It was argued that ‘under a suitable and inexpensive system of management, Assam ought to be able to compete with China in the cultivation of tea’.⁷¹ The official historian of the Company citing this as a significant juncture in the changed fortunes of its tea enterprise mentions that the Board of Directors streamlined the managerial staff on the ground, and went for a further reduction of wages offered to resident workers. A plantation labour regime premised on a clearer description and delegation of work and stricter discipline of the resident labour was attempted to be framed and enforced. The cultivation of rice lands, for example, was discontinued as it was now seen as an infringement of the plantation work process. The nature of assignment and assessment of tasks was made particularly more stringent and at times “excessive”. Kachari labour alive to the intensification of the work process and wages on offer were

⁷¹ S. Ball, *An Account of Cultivation and manufacture Tea in China* (London, 1848) p.358.

simultaneously seeking alternative employment on the tea plantations which were taking shape in the early 1850s.⁷²

The involvement of the new private interest groups and individuals in tea was motivated by the improved fortunes and operational experiences of the Assam Company. The strategies of the 'colonization of India and its resources' now perceived tea cultivation as one of 'the most profitable and agreeable occupation'. It was contented from 'the most trustworthy evidence, and from personal observation, that in time India will be able to supply not only to Great Britain, but also to Australia and America'. The attempts to move away from China as the sole source of tea was paralleled by a "rethinking" of "natural" habitat and the processes of manipulation of tea being peculiarly Chinese. The early tea enterprise in Assam gave enough reasons to believe that the plant could survive and flourish in a much wider range of temperature, soil and elevation than what the Chinese case would allow. The "classical" methods of planting and processing were also being reworked and improvised, in agreement with the specificities and contingencies of the local situation.⁷³

The monopoly of Assam Company in the cultivation and production of tea in the province was weakened by the early 1850s with the formation of new plantations in the existing planting districts and the other districts of Assam Valley (Table 1.2).

⁷² In the district of Lakhimpur, the Government garden at *Chaboah* was sold to a Chinaman named Among, which was later purchased by Messrs Warren, Jenkins and Co in 1851. Colonel Hannay who played a part in this transaction started his own plantation near Dibrugarh in 1852. In the district of Sibsagar, plantations were started by R Spears (Nigri Ting, 1853) J.E. Dodd (Noakochorie, 1854) and George Williamson (Cinamara, 1854). This trend of private European individuals taking up land grants to establish tea gardens was further facilitated by the liberalisation and expansion of the wasteland policy in 1854 and tea gradually found its way into all the districts of Upper Assam (Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong). By the end of the decade there were 68 "tea factories" in the districts of Assam Valley with more than 54,000 acres of land acquired for the purpose of planting tea. Captain C. Holyroyd, Collector of Sibsagar, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam. No 172, 2nd November 1859. Captain H.S. Bivar, Principal Assistant Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam. No 71, 8th October 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

⁷³ 'The Resource of India and its colonization', *Universal Review* (1859) pp. 343-62.

	Tea factories	Land acquired (acres)	Land cleared (acres)	Production 1858-59 (in pounds)
Sibsagar	31	13,796	5,227	8,46,249
Lakhimpur	10	14,038	1,700	2,82,000
Kamrup	10	12,207	297	6,160
Nowgong	14	11,034	...	48,000
Darrang	3	3,783	375	23,280
Total	68 (48 distinct proprietors)	54,859	7,599	12,05,689

Table 1.2: Tea Production at the end of the decade of 1850s.⁷⁴

The fresh and sustained impetus of plantation expansion coincided with a period of relative agricultural growth in Upper Assam, making the availability of labour scarce and pushing up the wages significantly.⁷⁵ This further jeopardised the task of mobilising enough working hands that could satisfy the specific requirement of being available in the “manufacturing season”. Commissioner Jenkins reflecting on the expansion of the plantation enterprise in the province and new “problems” of labour stated:

New Planters have been attempting to push on their cultivation to a greater extent than the means of procuring labour in the Province rendered judicious and prudent...more land has been planted, than can be kept thoroughly weeded and attended to, and during the short season of picking leaves, much of the produce is lost for the want of hands.⁷⁶

A distinct outcome of the expansion of tea enterprise and a broadening of the notion of the “ideal” habitat and terrain was the interest of speculators in the

⁷⁴ *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

⁷⁵ The rising agricultural prices of the time stimulated the cultivation of rice and of several cash crops, such as mustard, jute and tobacco, thus creating an exceptional demand for labour in the old agricultural sector. The District Commissioner of Lakhimpur informed that the wages close to the ‘new’ tea gardens had gone from Rs 3 to close to Rs 5 in the 1850s. *Captain H.S. Bivar, Principal Assistant Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam*. No 71, 8th October 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861); D. Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India* (Vol II) p.311.

⁷⁶ Colonel F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11th November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation* (Calcutta, 1861) p.23.

southern districts of Cachar and Sylhet (Surma Valley), which were earlier considered to be unsuitable for plant and systematic cultivation. These relatively “populous” districts were perceived as “immune” to the shortages of labour, which had plagued much of the enterprise in Assam valley. The natives of Cachar—witness to the initial spurt in tea activity in Surma valley—like their Assam valley counterparts, found little incentive in switching occupation to plantation labour on a full time basis. Only a minority offered their services in the non-agricultural season. The strategies of planters to oblige the locals through advances and “job contracts” for the following manufacturing seasons failed to yield the desired results. Many were said to ‘evade’ or ‘partially fulfil’ their obligations. Planters increasingly relied on streams of seasonal labour from Sylhet (about 2/3rd of the total), who would leave their homes during the winters to find employment and trek back to their agricultural fields before the advent of rains. This was grossly inadequate for the plantation work cycle as a significant period of their “absence” constituted the tea manufacturing season. The planters tried to attract and ‘settle’ (especially Kacharis) by advancing money, providing loan for cattle and a certain extent of rent-free land. But without any legal obligation to labour, the employers were unable to compel the ‘settled labour’ to work on the tea gardens as and when they required. There was also a tendency of these settlers of returning the loans and advances and moving on to another location.⁷⁷

The various moves of the Surma Valley planters to attract the Kachari labour had in fact put an additional strain on the labour situation in Upper Assam as indicated by the Chief Commissioner of the province:

It was hoped that the commencement of Tea operation in Sylhet and Cachar would have attended some relief to Assam, in drawing off the number of speculators, but that does not seem to have been the case as yet, and it is unfortunate that a considerable extent the planters on that side of the hills have been drawing on Assam for *coolies*, preferring our Kacharis to the ryots of those districts.⁷⁸

A growing consensus about the “insufficiency” of the labouring groups like Kacharis to render the increasing demands of regular/fixed labour was also

⁷⁷ ‘Our tea gardens in Assam and Cachar’, *Calcutta Review* no.35 (September 1860) pp.56-59.

⁷⁸ Col. J Colonel F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11th November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) p.23.

conditioned by their enhanced capabilities to bargain for wages and conditions of work. Such anxieties of the employers found expression in the reports of the superintendent of the tea Company who now complained that Kacharis with an 'increasing intercourse with the Assamese, are gradually acquiring their vices (opium smoking) and becoming less valuable as labourer'.⁷⁹ The work they rendered was now described to be 'deficient in amount and of worst description' and another serious concern was that they were not 'under proper discipline, feeling our dependence on them'.⁸⁰ Experience had told them that they could leave the garden or even strike at some provocation or grievance. But this labour discontent and mobility, in the context of expanding, rationalising and systematising plantation enterprise was becoming unacceptable. Such apprehensions were exacerbated in the much publicised 'Kachari disturbance' of 1859, eliciting strong responses from the planters and the local administration.

On the 7th of October 1859, the Kacharis stationed in the headquarters of the Assam Company in Nazira, assembled in front of the Superintendent's bungalow. They complained about a harsh fine imposed on one of their colleagues and demanded higher wages. This was rejected by the management. The next day around six hundred Kacharis from the Satsoeh factory with a concerted demand for a general wage hike. The management expressed its inability to comply without an explicit permission from their higher authorities in Calcutta. On further persuasion they 'discharged' the dissenting Kacharis from their employment. The following morning the Kacharis returned to continue their demand. A very nervous management now sought help from the local police who marched around 50 *sepoys* making arrests and threatening the protesting Kacharis to get back to work.⁸¹

The Commissioner of the Province acknowledging the graveness of the situation supported the Magistrate of Sibsagar in establishing a militia guard

⁷⁹ K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839-1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p.M-39.

⁸⁰ K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839-1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p.M-41-42.

⁸¹ *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861)

close to Nazirah to 'prevent any further breach of peace'. He lamented the almost absolute dependence of planters of Upper Assam (Lakhimpur and Sibsagar) on the 'whim of Kamrup and Darrang Kacharis'. They were described as 'a race often difficult to manage, exceedingly jealous of ill-treatment, and who at Nazira, have lately shown a dangerous spirit of combination and mutiny'. The event, he suggested should be a 'warning to the Assam Company and planters generally not to employ any great masses of Kacharis together' and make provision against such strikes, 'by importing other classes of labour, who can prove a check upon the Kacharis'. Such sentiments were reiterated by the directors of the Assam Company who convened a meeting in November 1859 and immediately called for an investigation to ascertain the material conditions of the Kacharis working for the Company. They welcomed the decision to establish a militia guard and also agreed that a lasting solution to prevent a recurrence of such "violent" incidents could only be when there are 'a larger proportion of *coolies* of another class'.⁸²

1.7 Assamese peasant as coolie labour

Before coming around to the 'solution' of obtaining *coolies* from outside the province which till then had proved to be extremely irregular and expensive, several planters desired that the state play a more active role in producing *coolies* from within. Bruce had earlier observed that the native's ability to cultivate sufficient rice and opium acted as a deterrent to their participation in the labour process of the proto-plantations. Such sentiments were reinvoked in the changed context of an expanding plantation enterprise and a more regularising work regime. The state was again called upon to discourage the

⁸² By late 1850s, company had around three thousand workers in Sibsagar. A third of the workers were inhabitants of the district and rest were the migrant Kacharis and Bengali labour. In British Guiana following the end of the apprentice system in 1838, ex-slaves organized themselves into task-gangs and went from plantation to plantation bargaining with owners over wages and conditions, a process which culminated in strikes (1842 and 1848). This, and not a labour shortage, was the reason for the dramatic increase in the immigration of Indian indentured workers from 1851 onwards. The introduction of Haitian workers into the Dominican Republic during the 1880s followed the first strike by Dominican labour employed on the sugar plantations against the imposition of wage cuts. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861); T. Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour: Case Studies and Debates* (London, 1999) p. 161.

cultivation of opium (as Bruce had earlier suggested) and augment the rent on agricultural land. The administrative incharge of Darrang echoed these sentiments in his report on the tea cultivation in his district:

...Undoubted fact that the ryots have the very greatest objection to exert themselves in the least degree, so long as they have sufficient rice and Opium; and any measure which would raise the Assamese population from the lethargy induced by excessive indulgence in the use of Opium, would unquestionably result in an improved condition of the people both physically and morally, at the same time that an increased rate of taxation would oblige the ryot to work, and thus benefit himself and the Tea Planters.⁸³

This discourse of moral and physical improvement of the Assamese peasantry revealed the plantation capitalist anxieties of pushing ‘more couched labour into the market’ (or producing *coolies* working for plantations). This was to be achieved through a significant decrease in incomes from agriculture (by raising assessment of land) and monopolisation and commodification of the drug of local preference—by prohibiting opium cultivation and providing opium through government shops. They believed that this would compel the peasant to work for wages on tea plantations ‘to obtain cash, both to protect himself from the land revenue as well as enable him to purchase *genuine opium* from the Government’. The creation of the necessity for cash to be earned through wage-labour/*coolie* labour was premised not only on the fulfilment of the peasant obligations of revenue, but also on the satisfaction of an addiction. Interestingly the supposed reason of Assamese laziness was not desired to be eliminated but controlled and made an obligation to participate in the labour process of the plantations.⁸⁴ In this context, the recurring trope of the opium smoking lazy native indicates the failure of planters to immobilise the native (tribals/peasants) in plantations and plantation labour regime as *coolie* labour, under trying conditions of life, work and remuneration. HS Partridge, a tea

⁸³ Letter from Captain A.K. Comber, Principal Assissant Commissioner to Darrang to Col. F. Jenkins, dated 20th October, 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) p.20

⁸⁴ Cuban and Peruvian planters permitted, and even encouraged, the sale, barter and consumption of opium by their *coolies*, in effect creating a mechanism of social control by alternately distributing and withholding this very addictive substance to desperate men. See, ‘Opium and Social Control: Coolies on the Plantations of Peru and Cuba’ *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, no. 2 (November 2005) pp.169-183.

planter in Nowgong supporting the idea of “monopolisation and manipulation of addiction” in the service of the plantation enterprise remarked:

...Attempts should be made so as to decrease the cultivation of that drug (Opium) in Assam, while the Government Opium could be supplied to be purchased by those who could not do without it. This would cause more labourers to work in the Tea plantations for ready cash.⁸⁵

Simultaneously the plantation capitalists favoured a strategy of pressurising the native peasantry to wage-labour through excessive taxation. Though land revenue was hiked in certain districts, concerns were soon raised that a considerable enhancement of revenue could create a situation of a decreasing quantity of land being cultivated—resulting in a fall of collections in actual terms. The shrinking incomes of the peasantry could further curtail an emerging market for British commodities, particularly ‘English cloth’ and ‘government salt’. There was an argument that the profitability of the tea enterprise was evident from the ever growing number of speculators pouring into the province and therefore their desires for ‘cheap coolies’ did not justify compromising the larger colonial interests of revenue and market.

1.8 The Migrant Worker solution

The limits of producing *coolies* internally marked a growing consensus for procuring imported *coolies* (from outside the province) as the “only remedy” for labour in Assam plantations. This has to be appreciated in a context of the development of internal labour market that had enabled local groups (like Kacharis) bargaining capabilities for wages and living conditions. The failure to significantly dispossess the peasantry could not ultimately alter the dynamics of the internal labour market. Apart from remedying this scarcity, imported *coolie* held the potential to realise the unfulfilled desires of discipline, immobility (living in the neighbourhood of plantations and working throughout the year) and completion of a variety of tasks (employment of family labour of men, women and children) which was essential for the nature of work and the work process of the plantation enterprise in Assam.⁸⁶ A

⁸⁵ *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

⁸⁶ In one of the contemporary pieces it was argued that the ‘these *coolies* with their families, will appropriate large tracts of rice lands; and in course of some years... may hope to find the Assamese, compelled by the want of land to forsake their “fixed habits” and “gentlemanly”

similar process has been observed in a different setting where the ‘failure to turn labour power into a commodity left them (planters) to find an alternative and politically acceptable form of unfree labour and a population which could be induced to accept such relations of production’.⁸⁷

In this scenario the administrative chief of the province reiterated that the existing difficulties and failures to import Bengali *coolies* had to be surmounted ‘before there can be any great extension of our present Tea plantations’. This he believed was now a question of ‘national importance’ as the land taken up for tea in Assam if rendered productive had the potential of producing up to thirty million pounds of tea or half the tea imports from China to England.⁸⁸

The global framework in which Indian *coolies* were being mobilised for plantation work became a point of reference in the deliberations on the question of labour importation into Assam. The Governor of Bengal suggested that Assam planters imitate the system of hiring adopted by the sugar planters of Mauritius. This was described as ‘a well contrived and equitable system’ where ‘a good selection of immigrants and families, decent wages (5 dollars) and a system of ration’. He wanted the planters to take independent initiative in this regard as he believed that because to a greater proximity of the principal ‘recruiting grounds’, a much lower wage and other benefits (land for cultivation in lieu of rations) could be an adequate inducement for the intending migrant to choose Assam.

On the question of difficulty of labour...see no good reason why labourers or *coolies* should not be imported from the lower districts of Rajmahal, Bheerbhoom, etc. If the colonists of the Mauritius, Demerara, Trinidad etc can obtain labourers from India, it should not be difficult for the planters of Assam to obtain them...imported labourers can bring their families, which is not the case when they go to the Mauritius or the West Indies...profits of tea-planting in Assam have been proved to be so great that

prejudices, gladly work for hire’. ‘Our Tea gardens in Assam and Cachar’, *Calcutta Review* 35 (September 1860) p.54.

⁸⁷ R. Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly Or Necessity* (London, 1987) p.89.

⁸⁸ Col. J. F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11th November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp.23-26.

planters could easily afford to give such remuneration to imported labourers as would command their services.⁸⁹

The planters and some local officials agreed that this new stage and scale of importation had to be more “organised” and “systematic” to undo the earlier setbacks to ensure the success of the present venture. A tea planter’s association was formed in 1859 to combine resources and efforts in recruiting in the districts of Bengal. There were meetings of planters and grantees of land in the districts Lakhimpur and Sibsagar in early 1860 to deliberate on the recommendations of the Governor and come to some common ground.⁹⁰ The systematic and organised demands on imported labour in a sense also reflected the ‘systematisation’ and ‘corporatisation’ of the plantation enterprise in Assam. In the late 1850s several joint-stock companies were formed with the intention to purchase the smaller private tea gardens.⁹¹ This again had a bearing on the magnitude and intensity of the requirement of working hands. While the private planter’s operation usually was contingent on their limited resources and the local labour situation, the companies were obliged to maintain a larger operation and working force. Illustrating this apparent difference a tea proprietor from Cachar remarked:

Private planter may only require labour for 100 acres, as far as his capital will go, but the Company requires labour for many thousands, and probably more...private planters go to clusters of villages, but that will not do for the company.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp.23-26; ‘The Resource of India and its colonization’, *Universal Review* (1859) pp.343-62.

⁹⁰ Proceedings of a meeting of the planters of the Sibsaur District, held at Cinnamara Factory on the 16th June 1860, for the purpose of taking into consideration, certain observations and suggestions referring to the importation of labor into the Province of Assam, as contained in an Extract from a letter from the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the General’s Agent, North-Eastern Frontier, No. 203 of the 20th January 1860. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp.69-71.

⁹¹ By the end of 1861, 160 plantations were held by 62 companies and individuals. Assam Company had 24 plantations in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Darrang. Jorhat Company had 2 plantations in Nowgong. The East India Company had 7 plantations in Sibsagar and Lower Assam Company had one plantation in Kamrup. Of the private companies, 15 companies held 19 plantations in Lakhimpur, 3 hold 5 plantations in Sibsagar, one hold 4 plantations in Kamrup and one holds one plantation in Nowgong. Remaining gardens were in hands of private parties, 17 of whom are natives (mostly in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur). *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

⁹² J. B. Barry, a Surgeon by training and proprietor of a tea company in Cachar. *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of*

The Plantation enterprise now showed strong preference to solicit state support in framing a system where large number of *coolies* could be procured economically and also defining some ground rules on which they would labour on the tea gardens. They often argued that the cost and difficulty of getting *coolies* from outside the province was to a great extent due to the poor communication infrastructure of the province and a general indifference of the colonial state towards the plantation enterprise in Assam.⁹³ There was some criticism of the government support in facilitating the transport of *coolies* to the overseas destinations in Mauritius and West Indies, where the Assam planters were said to be left only to pick the ‘refuse’ rejected by the migration agents of these colonies:

A native will not leave his village except under the protection of the *Sircar* or Government and he will go anywhere with it. The emigration to the Mauritius and the West Indies is under the protection of the Government and they are induced to go and I believe that if the Government gave us the same protection that they afford to the Mauritius and the West Indies we should have no difficulty in getting labour into Cachar and Assam.⁹⁴

There were demands of the supply of *coolies* to be coordinated through an emigration agency in Calcutta, under the control of Planters but worked with Government patronage. Apart from facilitating the recruitment and transit of *coolies*, the patronage of state was desired to frame an “agreement/contract” (for 5 years) between the *coolie* and the planter which would be binding in the court of law. The plantation capitalist discourse of contract and stricter penalisation of breaches was the definite attempt to shape the profile of the imported worker as disciplined and immobilised. The extension of breach of contract to Assam emanated from such concerns. The planters however remained evasive on the question of wages, describing the “peculiar” nature of

Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV (London, 1859) pp.214-226.

⁹³ Journey from Calcutta to Upper Assam in steamers took 12-15 days and in native boats it could take upto 6 months. *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol II* (London, 1859) p.46.

⁹⁴ J.B. Barry in *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV* (London, 1859) p.222.

plantation life and work where they contended that “benefits” and “piece-rate” made such clarity irrelevant. The colonial state remained reticent at this stage to define and regulate the system.

The project of “producing *coolies*” was now framed and the means of mobilisation (recruitment and transport) and immobilisation (settlement and conditions of work) of the imported labour on the Assam tea gardens. Plantation capital now required the patronage of colonial state and its juridical and administrative infrastructure to participate in its struggle with labour for “producing *coolie*”.

2. Contracts, Contractors and Framing the Coolie Solution.

2.1 Introduction

The consensus within the official-planter circles regarding the “coolie solution”, as hinted in the preceding chapter, held the promise of becoming a permanent remedy for the imminent work/labour anxieties on the Assam tea plantations of the late 1850s. The labour/work crisis, induced by the continued vacillation of the Assamese peasants towards plantation work and the enhanced bargaining capabilities of the local labouring groups (like the Kacharis) in the backdrop of “plantation industry”, could be offset and stabilised by the sustained and systematic influx of workers from outside the province—identified as *coolies*.

The early incidence of migration of workers, especially during the “tea mania” of the 1860s, exhibited tendencies of privatisation of recruitment, soaring rates of mortality during transit, and a general climate of “unwillingness to work” and “unsettlement” on the plantations.⁹⁵ This stood in stark contrast to the anticipated situation of a steady traffic of “cheap”, “disciplined” and “settled” labour. Migrant workers were not naturally assuming the roles and function of *coolies*. Taking this as the point of entry, the chapter traces and situates how the processes and strategies to frame *coolies* were articulated through a crystallizing nexus of the plantation labour regime and the *coolie* labour market. Qualifying a uniform/unchanging nature of plantations and the labour regime in Assam, the discussion would be

⁹⁵ The spectacular and speculative growth of the Assam tea industry during the 1860s and the consequent human cost has been subject to a host of official enquiries, contemporary commentaries and historical studies. The “crisis” in the industry which immediately followed this period was investigated in reports commissioned by the Bengal government in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In the same period, a colonial officer named William Nassau Lees offered a first-hand account of the turbulent times. *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet* (Calcutta, 1868); W. N. Lees, *Tea cultivation, Cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review* (London, 1863); W. N. Lees, *Memorandum Written after a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal in 1864-1865* (Calcutta, 1866). For later studies see P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) pp.96-108 and R.S. Rungta, *Rise of Business Corporations in India* (London, 1970) pp.95-108.

attentive to the changes and shifts in the discursive and material strategies and practices.

The first section discusses the formalisation of the Assam contract in the first half of the 1860s. It particularly interrogates as to how the contextual anxieties—for “protection” and “exceptionalism”—became a justification for its indispensability and retention throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The next two sections extend this argument to contend that the rationale of “protection” and “exceptionalism”—encoded in the Assam contract—attempted to construct and legitimise the authoritarian privileges of the plantation managers and the interests of plantation capitalism while, simultaneously and systematically, depriving the workers of their rights, benefits and the abilities to bargain with the employers. This contradictory impulse will be explored further through an “unpacking” of the positions taken within the different levels of the colonial establishment, which in effect allowed the tenuous “protection” offered by the Assam contract to be undermined by the rampant usage of a General Workman Breach of contract Act (Act XIII of 1859). This neither had the “protective” clauses of the Assam contract nor had the sufficient “legality” to be categorically applied to the plantation workers.⁹⁶

The developing indenture/contract system—encompassing a range of indenturing strategies and practices through the application of the contracts (Assam Contract and Act XIII contract) became a key mechanism in the production of low-waged/cheap and disciplined *coolie*-labour on the plantations. A critical variable in “producing” *coolies* (as desired by the plantation-capitalism) hinged on the costs of the labour recruitment and

⁹⁶ Ian Kerr argues that Act XIII of 1859 was one of the two Acts framed particularly to deal with disputes between employers and employees in the late 1850s, in what he characterises as a more widespread presence of labour process under capitalism in India. I. Kerr, ‘Labour Control and Labour Legislation in Colonial India: A Tale of two mid-nineteenth century Act’, *South Asia*, Vol.27, no.3 (April 2004) pp.7-9; Also see P. Mohapatra, ‘Assam and West Indies, 1860-1920: Immobilising Plantation Labor’ and M. Anderson, ‘India, 1858-1930: The Illusion of Free Labor’, both articles in Craven P. and Hay D. (ed.) *Master, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2004) pp. 455-80, 422-454.

stability of the labour supplies, which was obtained primarily through the private labour contractors and labour agencies based in Calcutta.⁹⁷

The next section delves into the nature of this growing market of *coolie* labour for Assam tea-gardens. Here, we particularly underline the plantation strategies of “cheapening” the cost and “improving” the quality of the supplies by taking recourse to more informalised modes of recruitment, especially what came to be designated as the *sardari* system.⁹⁸ It will further be discussed as to why in the face of this “cheaper” and “preferred” *sardari* alternative, the widely despised *arkatis* not only survived but continued to flourish, satisfying certain specialized “labour/work needs” of the plantations.

A convergence of interests in the production and marketing of Assam/Indian Tea from the 1870s resulted in a fundamental restructuring of the plantation industry and the manner and scale in which it intended to produce its tea and *coolie*. The new “pressure groups” pushed for “reforms” in the Assam contract system and its modes of acquiring labour. The stated objective was to rationalise operational costs, stimulate production and undertake corresponding “propaganda” measures to make Assam/Indian tea more visible in a cheapening and competitive global tea market. The next section traces the process through which these intentions/aspirations of special tea interests were translated in the colonial state’s rhetoric of “freedom”. It was now proposed to substantially do away with the existing body of “rules” (read restrictions) in the labour market and effect consequential changes in the Assam contract system through a new legislation—the Act I of 1882. The “free system”,

⁹⁷ R. Behal, ‘Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture system’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010); J. Sharma, ‘Lazy’ Native, Coolie Labour and the Assam Tea Industry’, *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no.6 (2009); R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The rise and fall of the Indenture system in the Assam tea plantations, 1840-1908’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, nos. 2 & 3 (1992).

⁹⁸ Some recent studies have drawn upon the insights made by Raj Chandravarkar on the nature and changing fortunes of jobber in Bombay textile industry to reassess the nature of Assam *sardar*. See R. Chandravarkar, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Jobber System in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1870-1955’, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no.1 (2008); T. Roy, ‘Sardars, Jobbers, Kanganies: The Labour Contractor and Indian Economic History’, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no.5 (2008); S. Sen, ‘Commercial recruiting and Informal intermediation: Debate over the Sardari system in Assam tea plantations, 1860-1900’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010). Also see P. Robb, ‘Labour in India 1860-1920: Typologies, Change and Regulation’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 4, no. 1 (1994) pp.46-49.

which the 1882 legislation proclaimed to facilitate, in fact, had a paradoxical impulse. While reversing the declining trends of labour migration, opening new areas of recruitment and depressing the costs of labour engagement, it made the terms and scope of Assam contract more stringent and the planter controls over labour more comprehensive. The last sections delves into how the revamped Assam contract system allowed the planters greater license to further their interests, while the corresponding “protection” for labour got even more narrowly defined and their abilities to bargain even further restrained.

2.2 Protection, Exceptionalism and the beginnings of the Assam Contract

The concerted efforts to “import” people for Assam, like the news of the discovery of tea in the province, were imagined to have a “transformative” impulse on the nature and magnitude of production of the commodity. The potential of Assam to displace China as the seat of tea cultivation and production was now understood to be contingent on the outcome of the labour importation drives from outside the province.⁹⁹ The sense of anticipation was further heightened by a general assumption that Assam held the potential of becoming the preferable and much more accessible destination for the thousands of migrants from the overpopulated districts of India, who were presently transgressing caste and cultural norms in their protracted and uncertain journeys across the seas, to labour in the post-slavery plantations.¹⁰⁰

A phenomenal demand for workers in Assam in the early 1860s—catalyzed by a fresh round of “liberalisation” in the wasteland policy stimulating wild

⁹⁹ Colonel Vetch and Dr. Barry, in their submission to a colonial committee, made an urgent case for the extension of an emigration system under similar regulations as in place in Mauritius. In a tone similar to Bruce and Jenkins, Vetch claimed that Assam possessed more waste land and was capable of fulfilling the entire English demand for tea. Dr. Barry further added, ‘that there are thousands upon thousands of acres available for tea cultivation in Cachar’. *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India* reprinted in *The Calcutta Review* 34 (January-June 1860) pp.16-33.

¹⁰⁰ Assam was depicted in the English Press of Calcutta as a more attractive destination for the potential migrant boarding ‘steamers and having a comfortable trip up their own native rivers’. This was portrayed in stark contrast to the uncertainties of ship passages to the overseas colonies where they had to venture the dreaded *Kala Paanee*. ‘Our Tea gardens in Assam and Cachar’, *The Calcutta Review* 35 (September 1860) pp.59-60.

speculation and “boom” in the tea industry—was barely in sync with any “natural” flows of labour from within and outside the province.¹⁰¹ The agents of the tea companies responsible for maintaining an optimum supply of labour started meeting the extraordinary demands through a practice of outsourcing the recruitment and transit of workers to private labour contracting agencies in Calcutta. The presence and escalating significance of organised private interests in the “coolie trade” was itself a manifestation of the sustained and amplifying demand for workers in the overseas plantations and the new inland destinations like the Assam tea gardens.¹⁰²

The agencies relied upon the services of a number of professional native recruiters (*arkattis*) who conducted their recruitment drives in the districts of Eastern India and forwarded their recruits by foot and rail to Calcutta. The recruits were temporarily housed in the numerous stations (called depots) owned by these agencies/contractors. Batches of assembled individuals were later taken to Koostea, about hundred miles from Calcutta, and despatched by steamers and flats to Cachar and Assam tea gardens.¹⁰³ The long, tedious and the hastily organised sojourns by steamers commuting on the river Brahmaputra usually took longer than the passages of the “coolie ships” to Mauritius and reported significantly higher rates of mortality. For instance in

¹⁰¹ According to a calculation of workers required per acre of land (at a conservative estimate of one for every acre) the Assam tea planters were in need of 200,000 adult workers in this period. M.A.B. Siddique, *Evolution of Land Grants and Labour Policy of Government* (New Delhi, 1990) pp.120-121. Also see K. Dasgupta, ‘Wasteland Colonization Policy and Peasantization of Ex-Plantation Labour in the Brahmaputra Valley’ in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp.35-50.

¹⁰² Calcutta had emerged as a major hub for labour migrating to overseas plantations and Assam tea gardens. M. Carter *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi, 1995); S. Chatterjee and R. Das Gupta, Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80, *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, nos. 44-46 (November 1981).

¹⁰³ Steam navigation was extended to Upper Assam around the period of establishment of Assam Company in 1840. A few years later, a government steamer was put upon the line from Calcutta through Dacca until Guwahati. It was only in 1850, that the steamer service was extended to Dibrugarh in Upper Assam, which sailed once in a month. The private company Indian General Navigation Steam Company came to an “agreement” with the government that its service on Brahmaputra will be withdrawn. The time taken for transit from Calcutta to Upper Assam was three times to Cachar. Evidence of Colonel H. Vetch in *Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV* (London, 1859) p.198; P.J. Griffiths, *A History of Joint Steamer Companies* (London, 1979) p.635

the year 1861, the mortality during passage to Mauritius, West Indies and Reunion hovered between 1.5 percent and 5 percent while the Assam steamers were clocking rates as high as 20 percent to 50 percent.¹⁰⁴ Concerns were voiced from within and outside the official/planter circles that if the existing state of affairs was allowed to continue, it would not only ‘neutralise the advantages of emigration’ but also ‘prevent labourers from emigrating to Cachar and Assam on any terms’.¹⁰⁵

The “coolie solution” for Assam was under imminent threat and the colonial state decided to intervene. This was seen as a departure from its self-avowed position of “non-interference” in the matters concerning the planters and imported workers. Yet the “exceptional” nature of the migration to Assam in the 1860s (due to high incidence of abuses and phenomenal rates of human mortality) not only necessitated but also justified the intervention to “remedy” the existing state of affairs.¹⁰⁶ A committee comprising of officials from the Emigration Department was constituted by the Bengal Government to investigate the nature and practices of the recruitment and transport of workers to the tea districts of Eastern India. The Committee’s investigations and report harped on the anxiety of loss and cost of labour (mostly on account of severe mortality and desertion) and attributed the blame squarely on the native contractors and their profit motivated practices for the tragic situation. They further recommended enactment of measures to provide a “system” beneficial alike to the labourers and their employers.¹⁰⁷ Grave disquiet was expressed regarding the spectre of private interests in recruitment, ‘who are interested

¹⁰⁴ In the year 1861-62, around sixty ships sailed from Calcutta to overseas colonies (Mauritius, Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guiana, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Reunion) with more than 22,000 people on board. The comparable detailed statistics for Assam steamers was not available and the rates of mortality were calculated from some selected cases. *Statement showing the Material and Moral Progress of India*, 1861-62 pp.302-303.

¹⁰⁵ Nassau Lees made a strong case for an interventionist role of state in the agricultural experiments underway in the 1860s. He argued that the ‘fixing of a new labouring population in those remote and isolated provinces of India was not the duty of growers tea, or coffee, or cotton, or indigo, but eminently the business of Government’. *Statement showing the Material and Moral Progress of India*, 1861-62, p.310; W. N. Lees, *The Land and Labour of India: A Review* (London, 1867) pp.207-208.

¹⁰⁶ *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency*, 1860-1861 pp.50-51.

¹⁰⁷ *Statement showing the Material and Moral Progress of India*, 1861-62 p.303.

solely in the profit to be made out of the capitalist's urgent need of labour, and both labourers and employers were at the mercy of the contractor'.¹⁰⁸

The Bengal Native Labour Act III of 1863—emanating from the suggestions and recommendations made in the report—signalled the foundational “legislative” endeavour of the colonial state to institute a tentative “sanitary” infrastructure, supervision and control for labour migration to Assam. Now the recruiters and recruited were to be registered and the modes of recruitment and travel had to measure up to certain prior approved rules and standards.¹⁰⁹

The premises of “exceptionalism” and the necessity of state “protection” were not just limited to characterise and intervene in the functioning of this early labour migration to Assam. The colonial-capitalist impressions on the “settlement” of the newly imported labour also began to be framed along these lines. Between 1863 and 1866, roughly a half of the 85,000 individuals landing on the Assam plantations were feared to have been permanently “lost” to death and desertion.¹¹⁰ Desertion and “unsettlement” of imported labour became a chronic concern for the plantations in search of “continuity” and “stability” of this labour—having invested considerably in their recruitment and transit.¹¹¹ In

¹⁰⁸ The committee particularly emphasised on the cost cutting measures employed which meant that the *coolies* were shipped in large batches without adequate supplies of food (mostly uncooked) medicine and medical supervision (*chupprassies* and unqualified medical men). Often they were alleged to replace healthy recruits for ‘feeble and sickly men’ after the inspection of the planter’s agents. Lees read this as the general *modus operandi* of the Indian contractor ‘where as long as he puts money in his purse, whether it be human beings or the beasts of the field he has to deal with, the amount of dishonesty or cruelty he perpetrates, will not sit heavy on his conscience.’ In a slightly exaggerated tone he even claimed that ‘the horrors of the slave trade pale before the horrors of the *coolie* trade of Assam and Cachar in the years 1861-1862.’ *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency, 1860-1861* p.50; W. N. Lees, *The Land and Labour of India: A Review* (London, 1867) p.208; W.N. Lees, *Tea cultivation, Cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review* (London, 1863) p.339.

¹⁰⁹ The Act came into effect on 1st May 1863. Under section 2 of the Act, the Lt. Governor appointed the Deputy Magistrate of Koostea as the Protector of emigrants and Superintendent of labour transport. Doctor Macnamara and Doctor G Grant were the medical inspectors at Calcutta and Koostea respectively. Section 27 of the Act named Goalpara, Guwahati, Mangaldye, Tezpur, Dikhoo Mukh, Dibrugarh, Dhunseri Mukh and Kokila Mukh as the places of disembarkation in Assam and the headquarters of Cachar and Sylhet as such points of disembarkation. *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency, 1862-63* p.72.

¹¹⁰ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.21, pp. 38-40.

¹¹¹ Nassau Lees attributed the desertion to the low percentages of women in the batches (5 to 15 percent). This led some changes in legislation informed by similar legislations passed for overseas indenture migration in this period which recommended an allocated number of

such a milieu, the “protection” of contract constituted the site of its remedy. A contemporary review of the tea operations in the province had underscored the centrality of contract for the immediate future of the industry:

A contract Law is now acknowledged to be necessary and if the Government will but allow that it has a direct interest in the importation of a robust labouring population into its waste territory and make organization for Inland Emigration on a large scale feasible...present difficulties will we feel sure soon vanish and the tea trade of India will become of far greater importance than even Lord William Bentinck ever anticipated.¹¹²

Contracts—as introduced by the 1863 Act—allowed engagement upto five years and the workers on failing to meet her/his obligation became liable for criminal prosecution. This nature of “contract” was fundamentally reconstituted in light of the high incidence of “unsettlement” on the plantations during the mania years—by the Assam Contract Act of 1865.¹¹³ The new contract explicitly empowered the plantation manager (under certain circumstances) to privately arrest the “deserting” *coolies*. Such an “exceptional” right was justified on the contention that the policing capability of the state in a “frontier” province like Assam was superficial, tenuous and generally weak.¹¹⁴ The “protection” of the interests and investments of planters apparently warranted such an exception.¹¹⁵ Many planters and colonial officials noted that the labour was being transported at the cost of the planters to Assam and were also guaranteed a predetermined rate of wage and living

women in each batches. In the case of Assam this remained a temporary measure. W.N. Lees, *The Land and Labour of India: A Review* (London, 1867) p.207.

¹¹² ‘Tea cultivation in India’, *The Calcutta Review* 40, no.80 (1864) p.342.

¹¹³ Present Working of the Coolie Labor in Bengal in Proceedings of Government of India, Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 11-12, December 1864; Communication from the Government of Bengal, on the working of Bengal Act III of 1863, and submitting a rough draft of the Bill having for its objects the Protection of Planters and laborers in Assam, Cachar etc. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30-38, November 1864. National Archives of India. Hereafter, NAI.

¹¹⁴ E. Kolsky, ‘Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam’, in M.D. Dubber and L. Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007); E. Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹¹⁵ A similar process is evident on the nineteenth century plantations of Java where the promulgation of the 1880 ordinance (containing the penal contract) as suggested by Stoler was ‘ostensibly claimed to protect *coolie* as well as planter’, which in effect went in ‘providing the government stamp of approval of coercion and the legal backbone of the planters’ power’. A. L. Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (Ann Arbor, 1995) p.28.

standard on the plantation. In such a context the manager/planter should be guaranteed an uninterrupted presence of labour on plantations and work for the contracted period.¹¹⁶

The Acts of 1863 and 1865—emerging as responses to a particular “crisis” in the history of Assam tea industry—left a legacy in the form of a “system” through which the imported workers were recruited, transported and settled on the plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹¹⁷ The necessity of “protection” of contract in an assumed “exceptional” context in which Assam recruitment and plantation operation was conducted—remained the *raison d’être* for its retention.

The succeeding Assam labour legislations (approximately once in every decade) during the course of nineteenth and early twentieth century initiated alterations and revisions, responding to shifting concerns of the industry, but strongly upheld in principle the indispensability of the contract and its specific manifestation on the tea plantations.

A particular “evolutionary” logic underpinned the idea and practice of “contract” system in Assam. The successive legislations/revisions in this framework were pictured as “stages” towards a progressively “freer” labour system. Yet, the possibility of such an appropriate moment (when Assam contract became redundant and therefore could be safely done away with) was constantly delayed. This was evident from the deliberations in the 1880s on the relevance of the penal contracts for Assam:

Tea interests in Assam require the protection of a penal labour law...If there were anything like a local labour market for planters to fall back upon...be left to regulate themselves as elsewhere...Some districts gardens can depend on a more or less regular supply of local labour from Kacharis and other similar tribes, and some gardens that are exceptionally situated can subsist on the labour of time-expired *coolies* recruited from gardens less popular or less happily situated; but these are exceptions...A great majority of tea-planters in Upper Assam are absolutely dependent for the regular prosecution of their business on imported labour..The cost of importing is excessive,

¹¹⁶ Communication from the Government of Bengal, on the working of Bengal Act III of 1863, and submitting a rough draft of the Bill having for its objects the protection of Planters and laborers in Assam, Cachar etc. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos 30-38, November 1864. NAI.

¹¹⁷ R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The rise and fall of the Indenture system in the Assam tea plantations, 1840-1908, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, nos. 2 & 3 (1992).

more in fact than a whole year's wages, and the strike or desertion of a large number of labourers at the busy season would, in the case of many gardens, mean not a temporary inconvenience merely, but the absolute ruin of the planter. On the other hand, it is abundantly manifest that the labourer is, as a rule, well looked after: he earns well enough after the first year (in contrast to home district); he is cared if sick...protected for ill-treatment...prompt payment of his wages ensured...still has strong inducements to desert... *circumstances of tea-gardens are still so far exceptional as to require exceptional treatment and exceptional legislation to regulate the relations between the planter and the labourers.*¹¹⁸

This premise continued to hold sway even in the early years of the twentieth century when the then Viceroy Curzon broached this issue at some length during a speech addressed to tea planters of Assam:

I agree with you (planters) in thinking that the time has not yet come when the protection and control, by special statute agency, of the industry in which you are engaged can safely be dispensed with...A day will probably come in the future when exceptional Labour Laws will not be required for the tea plantations of Assam...and when for the present artificial system will be substituted the natural operation of the laws of demand and supply. That is the ideal to which successive Viceroys and Secretaries of State, and I imagine also successive generations of Planters all look forward; but the means of access to these parts of Assam must be greatly improved, and the conditions of employment must be ameliorated and rendered more secure, before a natural stream of cheap and free labour can be expected to flow up and down the Brahmaputra (Assam) Valley. In the meantime, it is our duty to prepare the way for that consummation, by regularizing and purifying from abuse of reproach the existing contract system.¹¹⁹

This persistent impressions of the absence of a local market for labour/indispensability of imported labour which characterised the “exceptionality” (of Assam) in the colonial-capitalist discourses—as briefly discussed in the previous chapter—was an outcome of the specific nature of plantation work and the tea industry, as it was taking roots in Assam. The marginalization of the local labouring groups (like the Kacharis) from the work force was a relatively prolonged yet an incomplete process. This was driven by their enhanced capabilities to negotiate terms with the planters, in a context of formalisation of “industry” and the intensifying contest for cheap and settled workers. The contract regime sustained this “deficient” nature of the local labour market through an active and legislative interference. Again the necessity of protection (as enshrined in the contract)—as this chapter will further argue—assumed a very partial connotation and purpose. This was to

¹¹⁸ Letter dated 28th October 1880 from C J Lyall, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India in Inland Emigration Act 1882, Legislative Department Proceedings, no.224, January 1882. NAI.

¹¹⁹ *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston: 1898-1901* (Calcutta, 1901), p.225.

perpetuate the interests of the tea industry and authority of plantation managers, while gradually and systematically circumscribing the promised rights, benefits and bargaining possibilities of the imported workers.

2.3. The ‘Protection’ of Private arrest and the construction of managerial authority

It is pertinent here to outline the nature of tea enterprise and the life and work practices on the plantations, which became the premise for the assumed inevitability for the institution of private-arrest for the planters. The “systematising” nature of plantations of some larger companies (like Assam and Jorehaut) was interrupted by a mad rush of speculators in the Assam during the 1860s. This had unleashed a feverish trend—of land acquisition, jungle clearing and opening of tea gardens—without any necessary consideration and investment in establishing a suitable and sustainable infrastructure for the thousands of labourers being assembled to live and work there. A photograph from the period reveals such elementary conditions of tea gardens of the period.



Fig. 2.1: Tea Garden in Assam from the 1860s.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ View of a tea garden with thatched buildings in the distance taken near Cachar by Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte in the 1860s. A number of planters and workers are positioned on the

The labour “unsettlement” and mass “desertions” from these plantations were often a “response” to the grim circumstances of life and work, as evident from a few cases being reported by the local colonial officials.

For instance, in the year 1864, the resident labour force of a tea garden in Cachar (belonging to one Elgin Tea Company) left en masse on account of the rampant “unhealthiness” and daily incidence of deaths on the garden.¹²¹ On further investigations into the incident, the manager admitted to the “poor” and “diseased” circumstances of the garden and the very likely possibility of the entire resident population dying as a consequence of that. Such grim conditions of Assam plantations were hardly “exceptional” in the period. The hard and taxing work of manually clearing vast stretches of forested land to make way for tea planting was the order of the day.¹²² The rudimentary amenities of habitation and inadequate provisions of basic amenities made the “exhausted” and “overworked” worker vulnerable to debilities and diseases. In addition, an acute shortage and crisis of food supplies in the province precipitated by the burgeoning population created “famine like” situation on the gardens. The conditions were conducive for widespread destitution and mortality.¹²³

hillside. A caption below the print gives the location as 'Bosikundi'. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/019pho000000913u00033000.html>

¹²¹ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley: A Survey of Documents on the Economic History, 1832-1947 Vol II* (Delhi, 2006) p.498. Hereafter R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II*.

¹²² A marked difference is evident in two texts describing the framing of a tea garden in the early 1860s and 1870. The minimalist description of practically making a tea garden concentrated on clearing forests in the beginning of the decade is followed by a more elaborate and systematic approach. See ‘General rules for making a Tea garden in Cachar’, *Bengal Harakuru*, November 18th, 1861 quoted in *Bombay Miscellany* 4 (May-October 1862) pp.187-189; W. Roberts, *Notes and Observations on the several operations and processes, connected with the cultivation of the tea plant and the manufacture of tea; for the information and guidance of the managers and assistants in the service of the Jorehaut tea company* (London, 1870) in H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd.* (London, 1948) pp.345-362. See Chapter 4 for details.

¹²³ The want of sufficient food had been a great cause of sickness and mortality among the *coolies*. As early as 1862, the number of imported labourer far exceeded the supply of food available for them. This shortage was compounded by a general increase in food prices. For instance in 1856-57 the price of unhusked rice in upper Assam was around one rupee for eight *maunds* (640 pounds). This increased by 1862-63 to four rupees for 8 *maunds*. The minute books of Jorehaut tea company showed an acute scarcity of rice in 1863-64 and the company imported 600 *maunds* of rice to meet the abnormal demand. *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and*

A group of new arrivals on a plantation in Sibsagar district refused to join work. They found the place to be infested with leeches on which they were being assigned the task of hoeing. The intervention of the Deputy Commissioner to “settle” the matter amicably failed. The labourers showed a decided preference to court arrest (for breaching their work contracts) than return to the contracted garden. The attempts of the manager (Jamieson) to get these individuals back on the plantation after month long sentence was not entertained by the Deputy Commissioner. He explained that convicted individuals after having served their term were free to engage elsewhere in Assam or return back.¹²⁴

The private recruiters (*arkattis*) engaging and recruiting the labour force in the districts of eastern India had little interest and incentive in giving the prospective recruit a fair sense of the conditions of work, life and remuneration to be expected on the tea gardens. The Deputy Commissioner of a recruiting district in Bengal (Manbhum) informed a commission of enquiry (1868) that the recruiters with badges (required by the act) and licenses were often taken as Government servants, and that the tea garden work in Cachar and Assam was therefore presumed to be on *sarkar's* (government) gardens.¹²⁵ There were some aspersions cast by local officials that the ‘runaways’ from the tea gardens were ‘chiefly among those who have not been fairly treated (and) who have been induced to come under false persuasions and who have not had their agreement explained to them orally’.¹²⁶ Many of these disgruntled

Sylhet (Calcutta, 1868) p.22; C.H. Fielder, ‘On the Rise, Progress, and future Prospects of Tea Cultivation in British India, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 32, no.1 (1869) p.33; *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.22; H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd.* (London, 1948) p.51.

¹²⁴ The Secretary of a tea planter’s association in a letter addressed to the government of Bengal mentioned that many of absconders ‘have gone straight to the Magistrate of the District, requesting to be freed from their engagements, preferring rather to undergo imprisonment for three months’. ‘Tea cultivation in India’ *The Calcutta Review* 40, no.80 (1864) pp.330-331. J.T. Jameison, Secretary to the Sibsagar Tea Planter’s Association to A Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal dated 20th September 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 36, November 1864. NAI.

¹²⁵ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet* (Calcutta, 1868) p.27.

¹²⁶ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.498.

individuals were assured ‘easy work’ with earnings of the order of ten to twelve rupees, but most of them barely managed to make two or three rupees.¹²⁷ Stewart went to the extent of claiming that not a single batch he had examined showed any great knowledge about the agreement and also that they had little idea that ‘they are to be *coolies*’. He recommended the appointment of a protector of immigrant in Cachar, to counteract ‘the one-sidedness of the agreements which the *coolies* enter into in Calcutta with their eyes blind-folded’.¹²⁸ This view was largely reaffirmed by the findings of a report commissioned by the Bengal government to take stock of the tea industry in Assam. In contrast to the sanitised view often presented by the recruiters, the report enumerated difficulties encountered by the recruits in Assam:

The labourers have too often been deceived by unprincipled recruiters...have been told that they were going to a garden in a country where the means of living were plentiful and cheap; where they would receive very high wages and have little to do. They have found themselves set down in a swampy jungle, far from human habitation, where food was scarce and dear, where they have seen their families and fellow labourers struck down by disease and death, and where they themselves prostrated by sickness, have been able to earn less by far than they could have done in their homes.¹²⁹

An instance of blatant exaggeration and misrepresentation by the recruiter was reported from Dilkhosha tea garden in Cachar in the early 1860s. A batch of roughly hundred workers collectively left the garden marching up to the District headquarters to voice their grievances to the District Magistrate. Members of the contingent strongly resented the “digging” work assigned to them on tea gardens, when they had apparently enlisted themselves with the recruiter for service in the Bengal Constabulary. The predominant nature of work (clearing vast acres of forested land and hoeing the soil for cultivation) captured in the term “*kodalir kaam*” (digging work) became a recurring concern for many batches of *coolies* who were initially made to believe by the

¹²⁷ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Kalain to Commissioner of Dacca, 5th February 1864 in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.488.

¹²⁸ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* pp.499-501.

¹²⁹ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) pp.20-21.

recruiter that ‘they had to do nothing but pick up tea leaves and they would get two annas for every eight seers they picked’.¹³⁰

This climate of “unsettlement”—induced by a combination of the conditions of work, life and remuneration prevailing on Assam plantations and the practices of recruitment—was perceived by the planters as an affront to their desires for a “disciplined” and “settled” plantation working force. Again, the nature of the contractual agreement—as introduced by the 1863 Act—was found to be grossly “inadequate” by the planters for such purposes. The only “remedy” it offered was prosecution under civil law. The conviction was generally perceived as an “injury” to the interests of planter/tea gardens because of an additional ‘loss of labour’ due to compulsory imprisonment.¹³¹

A. Browlow, a planter from Cachar summed up this sentiment in a piece published in the daily Englishman:

How is that daily, almost hourly, act of insubordination now occurs amongst the imported *coolies* in the district? *Seemingly with no other object in view, but to tempt the Planter to strike his cooly*, to present a valid excuse for the *coolies* appearing before Government officials...part of law (imprisonment) it is needless to say is a dead-letter; for it hardly need be tried to prove its unproductive results, the consequences is that the liberated black sheep goes about the district infecting others, and this is going on, and on, and on—and where it is to stop no one can say.¹³²

To realise the desired objective to immobilise workers and force work, the planters often circumvented the provisions of law and resorted to widespread detention, confinement and physical abuse. A violent/physical strategy of “discipline” and “settlement” of labour at this stage was more rampant and substantially more effective in comparison to an earlier period.

An incident reported from a plantation (in Cachar district) in the 1864 alludes to the growing significance of this strategy, but also hints at its limits. During a

¹³⁰ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.500.

¹³¹ This Present Working of the Coolie Labor in Bengal in Proceedings of Government of India, Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos.11-12, December 1864; Communication from the Government of Bengal, on the working of Bengal Act III of 1863, and submitting a rough draft of the Bill having for its objects the Protection of Planters and laborers in Assam, Cachar etc. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30-38, November 1864. NAI.

¹³² *The Englishman*, July 24th, 1863 quoted in Communication from the Government of Bengal, on the working of Bengal Act III of 1863. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30-38, November 1864. NAI

morning muster, the manager of the garden Schoneman charged a worker named Summon for not strictly complying with his instructions. In his act of disciplining, Schoneman dragged Summon to a nearby tree, tied him up and hit him with fists and stones. Summon remained tied the whole day, and in the evening when he was brought back to the *coolie* lines, he succumbed to his injuries. The following morning when some workers made an attempt to leave the garden, they were caught and brought back to the garden. Again around five workers were tied up to the trees, and kept in that state until the next day. After their release, many workers of the garden “collectively” set upon and bound Schoneman and his assistant, took possession of his revolver and left for the *Sudder* station. They were intercepted by a senior police official (named Daley), with whom they lodged a complaint and willingly surrendered the arms.¹³³

Such instances of physical disciplining of Kachari labour on the Assam Company plantations of the 1840s and 1850s—as noted in the previous chapter—were largely absent and even counterproductive when mildly employed, leading to many work stoppages, strikes and mass walkouts. The familiarity with the locality and the awareness of other options of employment implied that the locals (like the Kacharis) could not be settled and made to work exclusively by force and coercion.¹³⁴ The presence of the emerging violent strategy of settlement was mentioned in a governmental report which noted that:

..the (Planter) stuck to his work, and it is not a matter for wonder that he was unwilling to make allowance for the *coolies* not doing theirs; and as he could not pay them for doing nothing, and they must earn enough to live, he thought the best thing he could do for them, as well as for himself, was to make them work by any means he could. Some such line of reasoning as this led to the practice of tying and flogging

¹³³ Letter dated 2nd September 1864, C.T. Buckland, Commissioner of Dacca to A. Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Proceedings of Government of India, Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, no 11-12, December 1864.NAI

¹³⁴ The Assam Company Directors writing to the Superintendent in early 1840s made it abundantly clear that ‘violence on the part of the assistants to the natives of the country or to the *coolies*’ would lead to dismissal from the Company.

coolies...when the amount of daily task did not come up to what the manager considered they ought to do.¹³⁵

This further substantiates the argument that the changing profile of the plantation work force (from local to migrant) occasioned the routinisation of practices of violence/torture in the 1860s. Absence of a fully “formed” plantation—where the “movement” and settlement of resident labour could be effectively monitored and controlled within its boundaries and organised in “*coolie*-lines” (residential quarters)—was not realising such desires of comprehensive plantation control.¹³⁶ The “isolated” setting of the tea gardens in Assam and Cachar—abruptly sprouting in the midst of vast stretches of jungles and usually at the margins of the networks of communication and spaces of human habitation—most crucially contributed to such a condition in this period.¹³⁷

The Assam and Cachar planters strategically mobilised and involving the local society in “*coolie* policing” by compensating those who captured and brought back the runaways. In Cachar, for instance, the garden staff and the local villagers were paid Rs 5 for every “catch”. This was later ‘adjusted’ from the earnings of the ‘absconder’.¹³⁸ Such practices were confirmed by several managers and superintendents of the tea companies. In a correspondence with a tea district commissioner, the superintendent of the largest tea Company (Assam Company) revealed that the company managers had maintained an

¹³⁵ In a report on the tea cultivation in India, a district officer mentioned that the practice of flogging was universal in Cachar when he took charge in 1863. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.23.

¹³⁶ See Chapter 5 for discussion on *coolie* lines in plantations of late nineteenth century.

¹³⁷ Discussing the nature of plantations in Cachar district, Stewart highlighted the general difficulty of access of several gardens which rendered the planters almost independent in the treatment of the *coolies* and wondered ‘how can the law prevent the planters from making such spots for cultivation’. Col H. Vetch mentioned to a Select Committee that the Assam planter is naturally exposed to the risk of squatting in the midst of jungle and make new clearings. He further noted that ‘sickness unquestionably attends an adventurer who goes into waste grounds for tea cultivation’. R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.498; Evidence of Colonel H Vetch, *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV* (London, 1859) p.192.

¹³⁸ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th February 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.475.

organized establishment of *chupprasis* and *burkundazes* for the apprehension of runaway *coolies*’ and that it was effectively ‘recognized by the Government officials of the day’.¹³⁹ There were instances of these employees ‘not confining themselves to catching their own runaway *coolies*, but seize any person they like’.¹⁴⁰

These “illegal” practices of policing, detention and arrest were substantially incorporated within the framework of legality through the infamous ‘right to private arrest’ bestowed on the planters by the 1865 Act.¹⁴¹ Though generally approved and welcomed by the officials of the day, this ‘extraordinary’ right also managed to raise some eyebrows. A senior Bengal official in a critical tone remarked that, ‘when the evils of the *coolie*’s condition were brought to its (Government’s) notice, it did not strengthen the district officers and insist on their protecting the labourers through the existing law. Instead of this, an Act (VI of 1865) was passed, which gave the employer the power of arresting runaways without warrant’.¹⁴²

Yet the justification for allowing such a “privilege”—as indicated earlier—was strongly premised on the “exceptionality” of Assam and the obligation to “protect” planter’s right to settle and force labour.¹⁴³ This became the substance of the opinion voiced by the administrative head of the province on the subject:

Since we have legislated for importing labourers into the Province, that further legislation is required to provide for their management after they have been imported,

¹³⁹ J. Smith, Superintendent. Assam Company to Lt H Scone, D.C. Sibsagar, Letter dated 12th May 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30-38, November 1864. NAI.

¹⁴⁰ Lt R.P. Davis, Asst. District Superintendent of Police of District Sibsagar, to Lt. H Sconce, DC Sibsagar, Letter dated 21st May 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30-38, November 1864. NAI.

¹⁴¹ *Annual Report on the administration of the Bengal Presidency*, 1864-1865 pp.107-108, pp.119-121.

¹⁴² *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.23

¹⁴³ Communication from the Government of Bengal, on the working of Bengal Act III of 1863, and submitting a rough draft of the Bill having for its objects the protection of Planters and laborers in Assam, Cachar etc. Home Department, Legislative Branch, Proceedings, nos 30-38, November 1864. NAI.

otherwise importers must, for the protection of their own interests, be compelled to have recourse to measures which are confessedly illegal.¹⁴⁴

This action was even curiously positioned as a logical step in keeping the ‘scales of justice even’. Here the *coolie* was perceived to have been the beneficiary of ‘special protection’ (by 1863 Act) against the manager and so it was ‘now the turn of the manager to be protected against the breaches of contract, or lawless acts of his *coolies*, as the master is against those of his *lascars*’.¹⁴⁵

An underlying assumption in many of these contentions was the “insufficiency” and “deficiency” of the existing laws and the policing capabilities of the state to satisfactorily respond. For instance, a local official argued that ‘it (private arrest) might not be justifiable where a perfect system of police and magisterial supervision existed’, but ‘in the wilds of Cachar on the very borders of civilization, there is no such perfect system or supervision’. In such a context, the ordinary civil procedure was seen as generally impracticable as the ‘magistrates were few and far between’. This was seen to be even more imperative ‘in the case servants (tea *coolies* in this instance) from whom it was impossible to recover damages’.¹⁴⁶

Notwithstanding the rationale of ‘exception’ (of Assam) and the necessity of “protection” (of planter’s right to settle the contracted individuals for work), the “privatisation” of the policing rights was a legal affirmation of the already rampant practices of capturing and detention exercised by the planters. There was ample evidence in the period leading up to the institution of the ‘right to private arrest’. This was not just restricted to the isolated plantations considering themselves less likely to be persecuted and consequently acting

¹⁴⁴ Letter from Col. H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General to A. Eden, Secretary to Government of Bengal 6th October 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch, Proceedings, November 1864, no 36. NAI.

¹⁴⁵ Letter from H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General to A. Eden, Secretary to Government of Bengal 6th October 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch, Proceedings, November 1864, no 36. NAI.

¹⁴⁶ R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The rise and fall of the Indenture system in the Assam tea plantations, 1840-1908, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, nos. 2 & 3 (1992); E. Kolsky, ‘Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam’, in M. D. Dubber and L. Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007) p.278.

more frequently, but ‘(the) law was much taken into their hands by all the planters whatever the distance from the (police) station’.¹⁴⁷

The colonial state agreed to partially relinquish its policing hegemony and even permit a degree of discretions on the part of the planters in pursuit of framing and producing an immobilised and disciplined working force. The planters, however, consistently exceeded their mandate and did not restrain their disciplinary practices to merely arresting “runaway” workers privately—as granted to them by the 1865 Act.

A series of “incidents” reported from a Assam Company plantation (Cherajoolie) in Darrang district—a year after the legislation of 1865 Act—alluded to the continuing incidence of violence and its undeniable relevance in attaining the work objectives and labour demands of the plantations of the period.¹⁴⁸ The “evidence” of torture on the labourers of Cherajoolie tea garden “accidentally” came to the notice of a local functionary (Thomas Lamb) during a routine tour which was recorded in his official diary.¹⁴⁹ The scandalous nature of these observations caught the attention of the higher authorities and Lamb was instructed to pursue some of his “references” in greater detail.¹⁵⁰ The subsequent investigation and a few oral testimonies (of individuals named Lalldawa, Juggernath, Padarut, Bebeejan, Bhodai, Ramdyall, Hurro Sing, Joothee, Roghoo, Bustub and Lalloo) which Lamb recorded—gave a graphic “personal” account of the overlapping strategies of work and violence in place on the plantation.¹⁵¹ The “violated” individuals (who testified before Lamb)

¹⁴⁷ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Goomrah to Commissioner of Dacca, 9th August 1864 reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II* p.499.

¹⁴⁸ *Annual Report on the administration of the Bengal Presidency, 1866-67*, p.119-20; *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867).

¹⁴⁹ Extract from Captain Lamb's Diary for the Week ending 12th March 1866. *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867).

¹⁵⁰ Lieutenant Colonel H. Hopkinson Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Durrung No 250 dated the 17th March 1866. *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867).

¹⁵¹ Letter dated 23rd March, 1866 from Captain T Lamb Deputy Commissioner and Protector of Labourers of *Durrung* to the Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam; From Captain T Lamb Deputy Commissioner and Protector of Labourers of *Durrung*, to the Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam No 166 dated the 28th March 1866; Captain T Lamb Deputy Commissioner of Durrung to the Agent to the Governor

confessed of having made aborted endeavours to “desert” the garden at different times. A common theme running through these ‘personal’ stories was a perpetual inability to accomplish the tasks assigned to them by the supervising authorities a desire to be relieved from their contracts. Most of them told that they failed to clear a specified area of heavy jungle (20 *tarhs*) as mandated in the daily work schedule.¹⁵² Each incidence of “short work” activated a patterned disciplinary procedure by the management. While some (Lalldawa) had their food rations cut, all of them were physically abused and flogged on every such occasion by the assistant manager (Richard Dunn) and the native staff. This became the immediate reason for their decision to leave. After being apprehended (mostly by the resident Kachari labour), they were brought back and subject to a fresh round of beatings and physical abuses. Juggernath had his hands tied upwards to a tree and feet to the trunk and whipped with a cane. Through the entire ordeal the garden doctor kept an eye on his pulse—ensuring that the garden would not be deprived of his services due to the beating. During the “disciplining” of Padarut, where he was also bound to a tree and beaten by the manager and the *duffadar*, the native doctor filled in by regularly rubbing salt into his fresh wounds!¹⁵³ The *duffadar* while receiving the orders to cane the offending Bebeejan was instructed by Dunn (the manager) to ‘strike lightly’ as the intention was just to ‘frighten her’. All of them were later taken back to their ‘routine tasks’ of clearing the heavy jungle.

The incidents confirmed the colonial anxieties regarding the necessity of protecting the “ignorant coolie” and provoked intense correspondence within the networks of the colonial administration and managed to find its way in a report presented to the British House of Commons. The episode was later

General North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam No 202 dated the 14th April 1866. *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867).

¹⁵² 1 *tarh* or *nal* = 144 square feet.

¹⁵³ Rubbing the salt into fresh wounds was a very common practice of disciplining slaves on plantations. This was believed to have prevented them from festering and enable them to quickly get back to work. T. Savitt, ‘Black health on the plantation: masters, slaves, and physicians’ in J W Leavitt & Ronald Numbers (ed.) *Sickness and Health in America: Readings in the History of Medicine and Public Health*.

picked up by a prominent “abolitionist” voice ‘The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend’, crusading against the emerging *coolie* labour systems in the different corners of the world. In their discussion of this incident they anticipate the ‘new form of slavery’ argument made persuasively by Hugh Tinker by suggesting that ‘wherever there is an assumption of absolute planter authority, the adjuncts of the plantation system should be rampant, and its brutalities exercised upon the bodies of the labourers, whether black, brown, or yellow—negro or *coolie*’.¹⁵⁴

The general disapproval of actions of the “violent” manager leading to legal action and his dismissal from the ranks of the Assam company did not undermine a broader process that was set into motion where the legally empowered privileges (like private arrest) and assent for the “protection” of the planter’s interests (to settle contracted labour for work) was sliding into an assumed prerogative (by the planters) for an unhindered maintenance of the local order and paternal control over the labouring bodies—even justifying varying doses of violence and torture.¹⁵⁵ The planters found great value in counteracting the disinclination for routinised plantation work characteristic of the difficult circumstances of operation (heavy jungle) and poor conditions of life and remuneration through systematised and routinised violence and torture.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ ‘Flogging of coolies in Assam’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend*, Aug 15th 1867 p.179.

¹⁵⁵ The Cherajolie episode was quickly declared by the agents of the Assam tea company and the Secretary of the Landholder’s and Commercial Association to be quite “exceptional” and enquiries were set into motion to ascertain whether such incidents have systematically taken place on tea gardens. Opinions were sought from the District Officers of Kamrup (Captain Sherer) Nowgong (Major Llyod) Sibsagar (Captain Sconce) Lakhimpur (Major Comber) and the “protector” of *coolies*. They largely confirmed that such excesses did not occur with any regularity in their districts. A year later a manager of Cachar tea garden was convicted for flogging a number of workers. *Annual Report of the Police for the Dacca Division*, 1868 p.24; *Annual Report on the administration of the Bengal Presidency*, 1866-67 pp.119-20.

¹⁵⁶ The Assam administrative head argued that ‘planters must yield to the irresistible temptation to flog unless the Government interfere more actively in their behalf’. He further ‘recommended a sufficient number of magistrates stipendiary or otherwise within practicable distances of planters’. In a report from early 1870s admitted in his report that ‘the idea that flogging is the only suitable and effectual punishment of breach of contract still lingers in the mind of some planters’. Colonel H. Hopkinson Agent Governor General North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal No 207 dated the 19th May 1866. *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867).

This self-assumption of the planter/manager as the dispenser of order and justice motivated calls for even greater “latitude” and “freedom” with respect to the modes of punishment.¹⁵⁷ By the late 1860s and early 1870s, planters were aggressively pitching for ‘discretionary magisterial authority over workmen...whereby he (planter/manager) may exercise a beneficial influence by threats, and in emergencies slaps, to keep up that state of discipline that always exists in a well-regulated factory *where the bane of court prosecutions has not penetrated*’.¹⁵⁸ This again drew sustenance from the standard ‘Assam is exceptional’ premise: ‘that with so few magistrates in the district, it must be planter himself that we must look to for the maintenance of order among these large bodies of labourers’.¹⁵⁹ In fact, the jury convicting Richard Dunn for his “excesses” pronounced that many of the plantations in Assam are located twenty to forty miles distant from the nearest court of justice and therefore ‘the employers of labour had great difficulty in having recourse to legal means for enforcing the fulfilment of the agreements made and were often tempted to take the law into their hands’.

Such temptations encapsulated a consolidating aspiration of planters to further stretch the boundaries of control beyond the limits set by privatized arrest and allow the privatization of punishment and legalisation of violence. There were many planters who often lamented that ‘(they) have little power over their imported labourers and the support of the Magistrate is required to punish severely labourers’.¹⁶⁰ For instance, the Section 102 and 103 of Contract Act II of 1870—which extended the planter’s right to private arrest—also made it mandatory to produce the apprehended “deserters” to the nearest police station. The alteration was read in certain quarters as “unnecessary” and

¹⁵⁷ In the 1830s, Jamaican planters objected to the imposition of outside magisterial (and police) authority. As with abolition as a whole, the planters did not challenge the overarching change but made it redundant in practice. P.D. Paton, *No Bond But the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780–1870* (Durham, 2004) p.64.

¹⁵⁸ W.A. Stoddard, Manager, Naphuk Tea Estate (Sibsagar district) *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.87. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁹ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) pp.84-85.

¹⁶⁰ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.113.

sustained persuasion and pressure was brought to bear on the government to make it “optional” in practice.¹⁶¹

This seems to have had a bearing in the case of an arrested runaway from Darrang district (Agra Bank), who was sentenced to a day in the prison on the request of the manager as he was satisfied by the “suitable” punishment privately meted out to him.¹⁶² He argued that imprisonment generated possibilities of interaction with “bad characters” in the prison and did not have a comparable deterrent effect like “fines” and “extra work” on the plantations. ‘If laws of no possible utility are made’, reasoned another planter, ‘they (planters) must supplement them by others which have a more practical bearing on the case’.¹⁶³

Flogging, as the incidents from the Cherajoolie tea garden confirmed, was “popular” within the planter circles as an effective mode of punishment, engendering the desired fear and compliance in the native labour.¹⁶⁴ A planter even claimed that ‘*coolies* as a rule do not care for imprisonment in the least, and if flogging were introduced, it would stop a great deal of absconding and other faults’. There were several suggestions to make it a “substitute” for incarceration—being rationalized on the grounds that it was a mutually “beneficial” solution for the state (saving on the prison charges) and the planter (saving the loss of labour due to imprisonment).¹⁶⁵ Moreover, its effectiveness

¹⁶¹ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.114.

¹⁶² *Report on the Police of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency*, 1872 p.128

¹⁶³ S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) p.170.

¹⁶⁴ O.G.R McWilliam, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, April 1873. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.41.

¹⁶⁵ C A Alexander, a planter from Cachar felt that if the coolies were to be punished before a magistrate, then about one-third of *coolies* would end up in court daily as complainants, prisoners, or witnesses. Instead he supported a punishment which is ‘sharp, short and decisive’. Another planter from the same district felt that imprisonment barely constituted as punishment because the *coolies* did the ‘same class of work they would have done on any garden’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) pp.47-48, p.50.

in compelling workers to labour under trying circumstances was “physically” documented and greatly appreciated by the planters.¹⁶⁶

The planter attempts to carve a new space for their disciplinary practices and actions beyond the jurisdiction of the ‘law of the land’ were neatly summed in the rationale for the nomination of the magistrate in every planting district from within their ranks:

(Planters) should not allow the (government) magistrates to interpret laws according to their whims and fancies...Tea represents a larger amount of capital invested than any other class of industry in India (carried out by European)...(and they) should be given a fair play in conducting their work.¹⁶⁷

The colonial state agreed in principle to the “concerns” and “demands” of the planters, but was apprehensive to completely overhaul the policing and legal institutions and procedures to suit the purposes and interests of the planters. The demand for a “planter-magistrate” did not find the necessary approval, but several assurances were given by the local officials that the prosecution of deserters would be done away with or reduced to a minimum.¹⁶⁸

2.4. Assam Contract and the ‘Protection’ of the Coolie

The notion of ‘protection’ which was intrinsic to the logic of contract system, did not merely touch upon the concerns of planters and the industry, but also claimed in principle to guarantee and safeguard the interests of imported workers. The abuses in recruitment and mortality during transit, as mentioned earlier, were apparently addressed through the initiation of compulsory “registration” (for recruiters and recruits) and the establishment of “sanitary” norms and supervision by the 1863 Act.¹⁶⁹

The colonial-capitalist discourses on the conditions on the plantations of the early 1860s were principally read through the category of ‘unsettlement’—

¹⁶⁶ In Ceylon plantations there remained a tension between government and the planters on the theme of physical punishments. J. Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) p.94, p.162.

¹⁶⁷ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.86.

¹⁶⁸ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) pp.116-117.

¹⁶⁹ R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The rise and fall of the Indenture system in the Assam tea plantations, 1840-1908’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, nos. 2 & 3 (1992)

revealing the anxieties and aspirations for discipline and stability of the working force. Yet, such a premise also generated some information regarding the conditions of work, life and earnings of the imported workers. For instance, the high incidence of mortality and desertion as induced by the potent combination of the circumstances of residence and the availability of necessary provisions and food was tangentially acknowledged in these enquiries.

Officials at the district level were intermittently articulating apprehensions regarding the ‘limited’ levels of information and background knowledge of the recruits contracting for plantation work. Reflecting on the initial experiences of work on Cachar plantations, a local colonial officer observed:

they (*Coolies*) do not know that they have only to pluck the youngest and finest leaf...how can they tell what sort of work clearing and cutting jungle is...operations are different and vary enormously and tasks given in the schedule are for able bodied men in the most favourable locality...*Coolies* are at the mercy of the planters who insists upon the full tasks or reduces it as it suits his sense of justice. I do not think that it is fair that a blind bargain should be made.¹⁷⁰

The work of plantation agriculture (like plucking and jungle clearing) which privileged prior initiation and familiarity—extensively noted by Robert Bruce during his stewardship of the experimental stations in Upper Assam—became even more relevant for the newly imported workers labouring on tea gardens across the province. The “discrepancy” in the individual performance—induced by the degrees of exposure to plantation work and by the specific location/condition of the site of plantation—was further complicated by the prevailing practices of task assessment of the labour. The task rate allowed planters/work supervisors a discretion and latitude to determine as to what constituted a “fair” amount of work (i.e. the daily task) to earn a daily wage on a particular garden. Variations in terrain conditions, nature of the work and experience of the worker were not factored in arriving at such rates. This resulted in sharp variations in individual earnings, placing the workers on the “difficult” gardens and newly arrived recruits at a distinct disadvantage. The disproportionately higher rates of mortality and desertion on particular gardens

¹⁷⁰ R. Stewart, Officiating Superintendent of Cachar camp, Kalain to Commisioner of Dacca, 5th February 1864, reprinted in R.K. De, *The Barak Valley, Vol II*.

and among the newcomers attested to such a tendency and continued to remain a “feature” of Assam plantations.¹⁷¹

The legislation of Act VI of 1865—principally motivated in regulating the conditions on the Assam plantations to restrain and curb the growing incidence of “desertions” and “unsettlement”—also touched upon welfare of the workers being imported into the province. A particular manifestation of the logic of protection—which underwrote the premises of the contract and the necessity of the Act—warranted the establishment of the post of “Protector” of *coolies*. They were supposed to act as the “representative” of state and ensure that the contracted worker did not have a “blind bargain” in circumstances deemed to be potentially dangerous and detrimental for them. The Protectors were required to regularly inspect the plantations and authorised to terminate the contracts on the grounds of failing health of the labourer and on valid complaints of ill treatment meted out by the management.

The 1865 Act initially fixed a “minimum” monthly wage (Rs 5 for men and Rs 4 for women) and required any subsequent deductions made for absence from work to be sanctioned by the local magistrate. There were other attempts to define a “working day” (9 hours) and “working week” (6 days). The subsequent legislations of Bengal government in the 1870s (Act II of 1870, Act VII of 1873) set standards of health and mortality on the gardens. Larger estates were obliged to have a “*coolie* hospital” manned by a European doctor and native attendants with basic medicine and medical equipment. Mortality up to seven percent was considered a tolerable rate for the tea gardens in the “unhealthy” province of Assam. Gardens showing death rates above seven percent were to be blacklisted, debarred from recruiting in the subsequent season or even declared unfit for human habitation and closed.¹⁷²

The necessity and institution of the “protective” clauses for the imported workers came under sustained criticism from the planters as instances of

¹⁷¹ See Chapter 5 for details for nature of work assessments and negotiations around these issues.

¹⁷² For details of legislation in Assam see R.K. Das, *Plantation Labour in India* (Calcutta, 1931) pp.29-40.

unwarranted and unnecessary state intervention. This view was captured in an assertion of a planter who categorically stated that ‘once the *coolies* land on the garden, all Government interference should cease’.¹⁷³ The core premises of such criticism were based on an argument that the planters having substantially “invested” in the importation of workers would have an obvious “economic interest” in their ‘protection’. This position was succinctly articulated by a planter:

Labour is the great machinery by which tea-land is made valuable; and it is costly machinery, too, especially for Assam tea-planters. Now, no man would be fool enough to buy a machine, and then willfully damage it.¹⁷⁴

State intervention was considered to have negative repercussions it had on the conduct of discipline and authority on the plantations. Anxieties were articulated that ‘over-legislation and inspecting during transit, arrival and on garden had filled them (*coolies*) with the idea that they are more important than the masters’.¹⁷⁵ A planter read in this a strong likelihood of ‘stirring up in their naturally suspicious minds grave doubts of their having been as well dealt by as they deserved’.¹⁷⁶ It was further seen as ‘creative of insubordination as the *coolie* looked upon the magistrate as his defender against the employer’.¹⁷⁷

According to section 26 of 1865 Act, any complaints by the *coolies* had to come through the manager. This “right” was constantly discredited by planters for being frivolous and mostly intended ‘to insult their employers and (to) have the ultimate pleasure of confronting their employers as equal man to man, and swear his money away in the court of justice for an assault’.¹⁷⁸ There were several reports throughout the nineteenth century of planters keeping cordons of *chowkidars* round the gardens and policing the connecting roads to prevent *coolies* from leaving to complain. There were other instances where the complaining parties were apprehended within the confines of magistrate’s

¹⁷³ E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of Tea* (Calcutta, 1874) p.10.

¹⁷⁴ S. Baildon, *The Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) p.155.

¹⁷⁵ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.47.

¹⁷⁶ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (1884, Calcutta) p.162.

¹⁷⁷ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (1884, Calcutta) p.85.

¹⁷⁸ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.87.

office. A provincial administration report in the early 1870s even noted that a planter ‘succeeded in inducing a weak or worthless native magistrate to punish a party of labourers for rioting’, when they were merely ‘seeking to institute a complaint for maltreatment’.¹⁷⁹ Again when around fifty *coolies* of Hoogreejan tea garden (Northern Assam tea company), lodged a complaint to the Protector on account of their wages being seven months in arrears. The court objected on the grounds that strict procedure was not maintained by Protector.¹⁸⁰

There were other objections of police entering a garden to investigate any alleged grievance on the part of labourers, without the manager or employer being made aware of the intended inspection.¹⁸¹ Proposals were made for limiting such inspections to sanitary and medical issues.¹⁸² A strong reason motivating such concerns was that an unrestrained access of state functionaries (especially the police) diluted the claims of manager/planter as the absolute authority and further threatened to bring their actions within the jurisdiction of the legal structures and norms. Such state of affairs was seen as tantamount to “unsettlement” of labour, which the Act of 1865 was believed to counteract.

The Contract Acts justified on the “exceptional” and the necessity of “protection”—as these planter’s anxieties and criticisms alluded—had to operate selectively for the perpetuation of planter interests and simultaneously allow space for their unilateral authority. In such a context, the Protector of labourers also came to be characterised as a “troublemaker” and as a planter argued that ‘if not gifted with common sense in a high degree’, he could ‘make a farce of the numerous duties entrusted to him, and jeopardise a thriving and important industry’.¹⁸³ This was deemed as disruptive to the “plantation order” where ‘his (protector’s) visits, which occur about once every six months,

¹⁷⁹ *Bengal Administration Report*, 1871-72 p.61.

¹⁸⁰ D. Sutherland, *The Weekly Reporter, Appellate High Court* (Calcutta, 1870) pp.29-30.

¹⁸¹ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.115.

¹⁸² This view was shared by another manager named Kingsley (Golaghat Tea Company) who said that ‘inspectors should be invested only with powers as to sanitation on gardens, and all other matters may be safely left to the action of the courts’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 47, p.50, p.90.

¹⁸³ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.90.

create a bad effect amongst those in whose interests he appears, and a management that may have been very successful in establishing a good feeling between master and men is unhinged'.¹⁸⁴

These criticisms and determined planter pressures informed and conditioned the idea and practice of the Assam contract, as it emerged on the plantations of Assam. For instance, the subsequent Act of 1870 (revising the Act of 1865) dropped the minimum wage clause agreeing with the planter rationale that the differentiated nature of plantations in Assam did not justify a precise time-rate wage and necessitated an ambiguous task-rate assessment.¹⁸⁵

This made the strict definitions of a “working day” and “working week” largely irrelevant and deeply contextual. Such ambiguity and flexibility, benefitting the differentiating interests of plantation capitalism, as we will further argue, became symptomatic of the nature and purpose of the Assam contract regime.

2.5. Act XIII and the Assam Contract(s) system

A particular manifestation and instance of this ‘ambiguity’ was the widespread prevalence of Master and Servants Act or the Act XIII of 1859 on the tea gardens of Assam. The Act was originally intended to regulate the labour disputes in the towns of India. This was extended by a notification of the Bengal Government in 1864 to the tea planting districts—primarily to institute some mechanisms of control over the local labour (especially Kacharis) who were prone to “deserting” and “striking”.¹⁸⁶

This extension was made on dubious grounds—as the Act was legislated to be applicable to specific towns (rather than entire districts) and for “skilled”

¹⁸⁴ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.162; Also see E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of Tea* (Calcutta, 1874) p.10 and S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) p.166. The contradictory implications of the “right to complain” is discussed in Chapter 5

¹⁸⁵ E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of Tea* (Calcutta, 1874) p.11.

¹⁸⁶ Bengal Notification dated 2nd January 1863 to the Districts of Cachar, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar etc; Bengal Notification dated 16th May 1864 to the Districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong in Bengal Judicial Proceedings, Jan 1863, Nos 35-72; Bengal Judicial Proceedings, May 1864, Nos 33-39; Bengal Judicial Proceedings, September 1868, Nos 81-83. NAI.

workmen taking advances from the employer for the discharge of a specific task/job. Recognizing such obvious and grave legal “exceptions”, the Bengal government maintained that the decision (to extend it to Assam tea gardens) was “experimental” and “tentative” and its future position with respect to its applicability (for plantation labour) would be conditional on the actual working of the Act. Yet, this ambiguity, doubtful legality and even the framing of the “special” Assam contract (by the Acts of 1863 and 1865), did not override and make redundant the “general” Act XIII contract in practice. The colonial approval for Act XIII contract further illustrated the partial notion of “protection” as the rationale for contracts. While the Act XIII contract guaranteed a degree of “control”/hold over workers, it did not have any partial “protective” labour clauses, as in the Assam contract.

An early distinction between Act XIII contract and the Assam contract was in their application to local worker and imported workers respectively. This distinction was quickly erased in the case of “settlement” of time-expired workers in the 1870s. The Act of 1865 permitted the individuals who had served their original terms of contract to be “reindentured”/ “recontracted” under the Assam contract. It was argued that a continued necessity of governmental ‘protection’ and “supervision” for imported workers prolonging their stay on the plantations. This stated position underwent a shift with the legislation of Act of 1870, where it was reasoned that after a period of residence in the province and familiarity with the work on the plantations such “protection”, as provided by the Assam contract, was unnecessary. The relevant section in the Act observed:

When a man had once emigrated to the tea districts, when he had gained experience of the country...he would be left to the protection of ordinary law.¹⁸⁷

The changed stand on the status of time-expired labour provoked fresh concern and opposition from the planting community, as it threatened to stimulate a local labour market populated by an army of floating individuals “relieved” from their contracts. This was akin to the “labour situation” of the

¹⁸⁷ *Bengal Administration Report, 1872-73* p.393.

early 1860s, which had mobilised planter opinion in favour of imported labour from outside the province (*coolie* solution) to curb the bargaining instincts of the native Assamese and abort the possibilities of any market of labour. An antidote for the impending crisis was outlined by the Chief Commissioner of the province in a letter addressed to the planters and published in 30th June 1874 issue of the daily Englishman:

...You (Planters) may have difficulties to contend with in consequence of the time-expired *coolies* from the protection of Emigration Act...Freer the labour is the greater the difficulty of adjusting his claim is. Free labour is causing the same complications in England as it must one day cause here...good hope that your industry may weather the storm...*may remind you the expedient of making contracts under advances with your labourers, and thus bringing them within the scope of Act XIII.*¹⁸⁸

The public approval of a provincial head for a contract (Act XIII) with suspect applicability to the imported labour evoked “critical” noises from the Bengal administration and the Government of India. The Secretary of Revenue and Agriculture Department, in a letter, observed that the extension of Act XIII through an analogy of the “skilled” workman and plantation *coolies* was misplaced, as the “advances” paid to the former were the fruits of their labour while in case of the latter it was merely an inducement for re-engagement. Also, the underlying assumption of *coolie*-work on the plantations as “skilled” work was far from being a settled issue. More significantly, the idea of extension defeated the logic and purpose of relieving the time-expired labourers from the jurisdiction/protection of contract (Assam contract) in the first place. The Bengal Government, in pursuance of the changed position, instructed the protectors/inspectors in a resolution dated January 1874: ‘to make it clear to the labourers who are bound by the provisions of the law and ones who are free’.¹⁸⁹

The Chief Commissioner of Assam warned against ‘seriously unsettling the fairly amicable relations between employer and employee’. Such anxieties

¹⁸⁸ Application of Act XIII of 1859 to time-expired labourers in Assam, Home A, March 1875. NAI. Emphasis mine

¹⁸⁹ Application of Act XIII of 1859 to time-expired labourers in Assam, Home A, March 1875. NAI.

were apparently voiced in his personal correspondence with some planters who told him of ‘the danger planters would be in if the fact if the fact of their (labourers) emancipation be made known to them’. The Chief Commissioner argued for application of Act XIII the reasons for granting such an extension:

Application of the Act (Act XIII) is desirable, mainly on the ground that it is best method of checking illegal practices and to provide an easy legal remedy...courts are not sufficiently strong in Assam to afford protection desirable to both planters and *coolies*...there must be an inequality owing to superior physical force and other qualities (of planter) (and) we shall have violence practiced unless we allow legal remedy for default.¹⁹⁰

The Chief Commissioner’s stand on the Act XIII question ultimately favoured the strategies of “retarding” the possibility of any local labour market of time-expired *coolies* and “sustaining” the “exceptional” character of the Assam labour situation. This was another instance in which a contract was called upon to dynamically intervene and render deficient/insufficient the local labour market on which it was paradoxically justified. The organising logic of the Assam contract (exceptionalism, necessity of protection and insufficient state policing) again became the validating rationale for the Act XIII contract. Act XIII contract promised to restore the “hold” and “authority” of the managers which was apparently weakened by the non-applicability of Assam contract for the time-expired labourers.

Further, the Commissioner gave his approval to persist with the “ambiguity” regarding the legal status of the contracted labour. In practice, the planters would often ‘claim’ the rights of control and arrest (of the Assam contract) for the Act XIII contracted labourers, without being obliged to offer the benefits of Assam contract or being subjected to its mandatory regulations and supervisions. The ambiguity and the overlapping domain of contracts rather being incidental and exceptional was central to the practice of the indenture

¹⁹⁰ Application of Act XIII of 1859 to time-expired labourers in Assam, Home A, March 1875. NAI.

system of the Assam tea gardens—as it manifested during the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁹¹

2.6 Contractors, Sardars and the Assam Contract System

The effectiveness of the contract system to produce *coolie* in the plantations but also to reproduce itself to a large extent hinged on a fair presence of workers—which after the early 1860s was almost entirely procured from outside the province. The huge human “losses” on the plantations due to high rates of mortality and desertion, without any addition through natural means (negative growth rate of population), made it imperative that an unremitting flow of people was maintained. This was not only to satisfy the labour demands of an expanding industry but also to barely sustain the average of the existing working force. The indispensability of “private labour contractors” for such purposes, as we have already mentioned, remained pivotal during the decade and later. During the mania years (early 1860s) the contractors were managing to fulfill an annual requirement in excess of 30,000 individuals, attaining a high of 45,000 in the year 1865. This was followed by a sharp decline reaching an annual average of only around 5,000 recruits in the years 1869 and 1870.¹⁹²

The rationalisation in the industry, after a period of speculation and collapse, was a factor in the falling numbers. But such a sharp decline created unease within the planter circles regarding the immediate and future labour situation on the plantations. Such fears of “insufficiency” of labour were heightened by a parallel and rising trend of the costs at which they were being procured. Some rough estimates of the Calcutta contracting agencies indicates that the labour contracting rates had jumped from ten to twelve rupees at the beginning of the 1860s to a whopping sixty rupees during the middle years of the decade.

¹⁹¹ See later sections of this chapter and Chapter 6 for the differentiated indenturing practices in the two valleys of Assam.

¹⁹² Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency for the years 1861 to 1870.

This briefly subsided and settled at around forty five to fifty rupees during the closing part of the decade.¹⁹³

Assam planters read these tendencies as yet another instance of the “price” they had to pay for the “unnecessary” governmental intervention. They consistently targeted the sanitary and bureaucratic regulations/norms, initiated by the 1863 Act, for hiking the cost of the recruitment and transit and putting an additional and unsustainable “economic” burden on a nascent industry. The burgeoning economic burden/investment’ (as a consequence of the governmental measures) was a premise for its protection—most notoriously through the luxury of private arrest for the planters. Further, the searching enquiries by the local district magistrates to ascertain the credentials of the recruiters and the consent of the recruits were discredited as irritants and perceived as a strong deterrent for many who would have otherwise gone “willingly” to Assam.¹⁹⁴

The labour contractors on whom the planters almost exclusively relied for their supplies were curiously perceived as the unintended “beneficiaries” of the plantation’s desire for labour of an imported variety. The *arkattis* (native recruiters)—who actually conducted the recruitment operations for the contractors in the villages and towns of eastern India—epitomised the abuse and corruption which characterised the “contractor system” in the planter discourses.

While their unique and indispensable function in the system allowed the contractors to extract inflated rates, they were frequently blamed for shipping “bad batches” filled with weak, sickly and useless people and bad races unfit for Assam—causing the high mortality, reluctance to work and desertion on the plantations.¹⁹⁵ Here it is useful to indicate a persuasive discourse being

¹⁹³ Information as to increase in cost of importation of coolies, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, August 1904, ASA.

¹⁹⁴ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874).

¹⁹⁵ This became a recurrent theme in the annual Assam Labour report (later designated as Report on Labour Immigration into Assam) specifically dealing with the condition of ‘immigrant’ labour on the tea gardens, and the appropriate sections of the Bengal Inland Emigration Report, statistically detailing the transport of labour to these tea gardens, from the mid-1870s. In light of these observations, the Government of Bengal instructed the

mobilised and formalised on the Assam plantations of a racialised sociology of labour, which mapped the labour-value of individuals and their ability to survive and flourish in the Assam on their constructed “racial” profile. The *Junglees/Dhangurs* of Chotanagpur, at least from the late 1860s, firmly occupied the pinnacle of this racial hierarchy and were widely celebrated and sought after for their innate ability to work hard and naturally adapt to the Assam climate. The upcountry *coolies* from Bihar and North West Provinces languished at the bottom and were often condemned to be “racially” conditioned for death and desertion on the tea gardens. This racial discourse of Assam *coolie*-labour which has assumed the nature of being fixed and unchanging in the historical scholarship, in fact, did show some shifts according to time and space.¹⁹⁶

The “bad batch” and the “bad race” theory, often feeding into each other, became a patent excuse for the chronic “unhealthiness” and mortality on the

Superintendent of Emigration for an investigation and report on the ‘alleged importation into Assam of an inferior type of *coolie*’ in the late 1870s. The opinion of the governmental authorities and tea garden managers and companies were contained in a report. J.G. Grant, Superintendent of Emigration to Undersecretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 16th August 1880; W.J. Palmer, Medical Inspector of Emigrations to the Superintendent of Emigration, 24th March 1879. Transport of useless coolies to Assam, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch A, nos. 32-35, November 1880. NAI.

¹⁹⁶ In the early 1870s a “sanitary” committee was set up to investigate cases of high mortality in Darrang gardens (Adhibari and Baliparah). One garden was found unfit for human habitation and closed, but there was no explicit racial discourse in explaining the deaths. Again in a correspondence dated 30th August 1873, the Inspector of Labourers for Assam (Partridge) showed that mortality among “upcountry” workers was not especially high. This was in contrast to the explanations given out after investigation of tea gardens in the late 1870s. For instance, several gardens in Upper Assam (Sibsagar and Lakhimpur) reported high rates of mortality in 1877 and 1878. The committee explained this as due to ‘improper selecting the individual *coolies* rather than any special condition to the gardens upon which they are employed’. A sustained critique of the “racial” theory of disease and work was elaborated by the Sanitary Commissioner of Assam in the late 1870s, Charles de Renzy in the annual sanitary reports where he showed how the conditions of work and diet affected the life expectancy of new *coolies* and *coolies* from different geographical regions. Insufficiency of nitrogen and oil in the standard diet which prevailed mostly on the out of way gardens where the high prices of *dal* and *ghee* made them subsist only on rice. He promoted the idea of “diet regulation” which had yielded positive results in Jamaica and Trinidad. He pushed for the idea that the rate of seven percent (mortality) should be acceptable for the new clearances because of insufficient food and water. *Bengal administration Report*, 1871-72, p.62; *Assam Sanitary Report*, 1878, p.7; *Assam Sanitary Report* 1879, p.17. For a general discussion see K. Ghosh, ‘A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India’ in G. Bhadra, G Prakash and S. Tharu (ed.) *Subaltern Studies, Vol X* (New Delhi, 1999) and P. Chatterjee, ‘Secure this excellent class of labour: Gender and Race in Labour Recruitment for British Indian Tea Plantations’ *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 27, no.3 (July-Sep 1995).

tea gardens and thereby gave some substance to the defaulting plantations to evade the sanitary norms and the consequent penalties. ‘Before mortality rates on a garden are made cause for its being closed as unfit for human habitation’ argued a planter in the early 1870s, ‘the rate of mortality among the class of persons among whom deaths occur should be ascertained (as it) may equally be a question of the unsuitableness of the class of labourers for tea-factory work, as of the unsuitableness of the garden as a place of human habitation’.¹⁹⁷ This further ‘necessitated’, according to many planters, the strict plantation disciplinary practices to make the habitual bolters and shirkers populating the “bad batches”/ “bad races” to settle and work.

An alternative and relatively informal mode of labour recruitment and transit was simultaneously being explored by some of the larger tea companies (like the Assam Company and Jorehaut Company) during the years of acute labour demand and high recruiting costs in the 1860s. They encouraged some of their older employees (designated as *sardars*) to go back to their villages to get willing family members and acquaintances to return with them to work on the tea garden. The *sardari* system—as it came to be known on the Assam plantations—assumed a reputation of being a qualitatively superior and “cheaper” method of labour engagement, bringing in families, kin members, acquaintances and friends, more keen to settle down and work.¹⁹⁸

The inaugural legislation (1863 Act) regulating the subject of ‘labour transport’ to Assam did not approve of any other system of recruitment and transit, apart from the “registered” contractors engaging people who were required to offer consent in the presence of the magistrate in their home district. Later they were taken through government approved routes/depots to Calcutta, where they would sign the contract and then be despatched to the assigned tea gardens. These “illegal” practices of informal/*sardari* recruitment

¹⁹⁷ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.115.

¹⁹⁸ Antrobus records in his book on Jorehaut Tea Company that the first attempt of the Company to use *sardars* was in the year 1864 when two *sardars* were sent to Chota Nagpur. The experiment was largely considered a “failure” because the *sardars* were away for five months and could bring in around twenty people. H.A. Antrobus, *Jorehaut tea Company* (London, 1948) p.53. For a recent discussion on the emergence of sardar in Assam see S. Sen, ‘Commercial recruiting and Informal intermediation: Debate over the Sardari system in Assam tea plantations, 1860-1900’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010).

found unqualified backing in an official enquiry (1868) assessing the potentialities of the Assam tea industry in the wake of a crisis (tea mania) and suggesting a “profitable” course of action for the investors and tea planters. The report favoured a strategy of promoting *sardars* as a measure to end the reliance on the ‘evil’ contractors who extracted exorbitant prices and dished out unreliable supplies. The “family-kin” nature of the *sardari* system was particularly singled out for facilitating a strong enduring relation between the employers and employed. Keeping in mind its undeniable value, the committee recommended that *sardars* be allowed extraordinary freedom to take up to fifty people and also be given a choice on the mode and routes of transport they wished to take. This they reasoned would also diminish the menace of cholera, rampant in the overcrowded Calcutta depots, where the contractor’s recruits were obliged to congregate.¹⁹⁹

The *sardar* was finally given a legal standing in the 1870 Act, but the Act did not completely subscribe to the recommendations of the 1868 report, and produced a distinction on the basis of the number of individuals the *sardars* actually engaged. The guiding principle was supposedly to contain the threat of epidemics, which had become a disturbing feature of the larger batches of migrating groups. The *sardar* with less than twenty recruits (petty *sardars*) was merely required to register in the recruiting districts and follow their own routes, while the ones with more than twenty individuals (recruiter *sardars*) had to obey all the procedures and rules stipulated for licensed recruiters.

This legalisation of the *sardari* system by the 1870 Act should have ‘logically’ transformed the ways in which the labour was recruited and organized on the Assam tea gardens—being accepted across the board as a cheaper and qualitatively superior mode than the prevailing contractor system. Yet, the dependence of Assam planters on the contractor showed no signs of waning. WA Stoddard, the manager of Naphuk tea garden in Assam valley, testifying to an investigation of the industry in 1873 admitted that :‘(he) prefers the dearer but safer course of importing from one of the many depots in Calcutta,

¹⁹⁹Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet (Calcutta, 1868) p.27; *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) pp.271-272.

and thereby ensure that the estimated season's operations shall be completed'.²⁰⁰ The division manager of the Assam Company plantations responding to the same investigation further explained the reasons for the importance of contractors for the tea gardens under his supervision:

There are some of our gardens on which the labour force cannot be maintained directly by *sardari* recruiting; some gardens with short labour force and a heavy wastage have to depend partly on contractor's *coolies*.²⁰¹

It is fairly evident that though the contractor's reliability in terms quality of labour supplied was under the cloud, his dependability in terms of quantity supplied and his proficiency in 'delivering to order' could not be matched by the *sardar*.

This was vital to the work operation in place on the plantations of the period, which was still governed by a large presence of working hands for conducting the varied tasks in the agricultural fields. It did not take away from the fact that the 'original' knowledge of planting and plucking learnt by the "pioneers" from the Chinese were being reworked, and 'new methods which would yield more tea and maintain the yield of the bushes better' was constantly tried and implemented.²⁰² The growing use of machinery had arguably "reduced" the labour employed on the plantations, but for the work that entailed 'keeping a large number of *coolies*, viz. hoeing and plucking, no attempt was made to substitute other than the work of men's hands'.²⁰³

Contrary to Bruce's prophecy of the revolutionary impact of British technology and mechanization, the indispensability and "skills" of hand labour in the processes of manufacture was only partially displaced. The 1872 investigation reported that on some larger estates, the rolling of tea leaves was effected by the means of machinery, but most of the gardens were unable to employ steam-power and leaves were still rolled by hand. A planter while endorsing the efficacy of machines, found many of them as purely

²⁰⁰ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.68.

²⁰¹ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.163

²⁰² H. Mann, *The early history of the tea industry in north-east India* (Calcutta, 1918) p.30

²⁰³ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.238

‘experimental’ and ‘full of faults’ and which had to be ‘re-modelled before they will work’.²⁰⁴ In a prize winning essay on the ‘Manufacture of Tea’ published in the early 1870s, the author noted that the rolling machine had not entirely ‘superseded the necessity of hand rolling’ because they were incapable of giving ‘the nice final twist’, which could only be obtained by hand. He found that many gardens in Cachar after a period of trial had dropped using such machines and gone back to hand-rolling.²⁰⁵ A statistical account of the province noted that ‘tea houses’ concurrently and alternately used rolling by hand and machine, depending on the labour situation of the gardens.²⁰⁶

Such practices of work and labour implied that a shortage of labourers employed in the differentiated yet related activities in the field and factory could gravely and negatively alter the quality and quantity of the garden’s yield. The value of the contractor for “safely” achieving such work/production purposes can be further stressed by quantifying the ‘magnitude’ of the labour replenishments required in the tea gardens in the late 1870s. For instance, in the year 1876, Jorehaut Tea Company operating in Assam valley had around 3,500 acres under tea and roughly 3,800 working adults. The company’s assessment of the labour requirements for the approaching season (after factoring its usual “losses”) was around 1,700 adults or more than forty percent of the existing workforce. The assessment did not radically change in the subsequent season (1877), when a demand of 1,500 adults was placed before the agents in Calcutta for delivery.²⁰⁷ Situating an analogous trend for the entire province in the year 1878, one finds that the new migrants arriving in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar in Surma valley constituted around nine percent of the existing working force. The corresponding figures for the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Darrang in Assam valley were significantly higher at 15 percent, 18 percent and 26 percent respectively. The numbers rose dramatically for the remaining districts of Assam valley (i.e. Kamrup and

²⁰⁴ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884).

²⁰⁵ E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of Tea* (London, 1883) p.118.

²⁰⁶ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. 1* (London, 1879) p.390

²⁰⁷ H.A. Antrobus, *History of Jorehaut Company* (London, 1948) p.54.

Nowgong), where more than 40 percent of the workforce had arrived and commenced work in the very same year.²⁰⁸

Year	Average Labour Force	Percentage of new immigrants
1877	146,513	45.2
1878	172,569	43.4
1879	184,935	36.6
1880	188,497	21.5

Table 2.1: Proportion of new immigrants in the workforce.²⁰⁹

It was very evident that to consistently muster such large numbers, which gained a particular urgency in some planting districts (mostly in the Assam Valley) and on some tea gardens (prone to “wastage”), the *sardar’s* recruitment was not adequate or even at times available, and the ‘option’ of the contractor had to be kept and exercised. The relevance of the contractor was even more marked, for certain regions and particular estates stigmatized as “unpoupular” due to poor conditions of life and work. In those circumstances, the necessity to bind workers and force work through the “protection” of contract (especially Assam contract) would have to be backed by recruits provided by contractors.²¹⁰

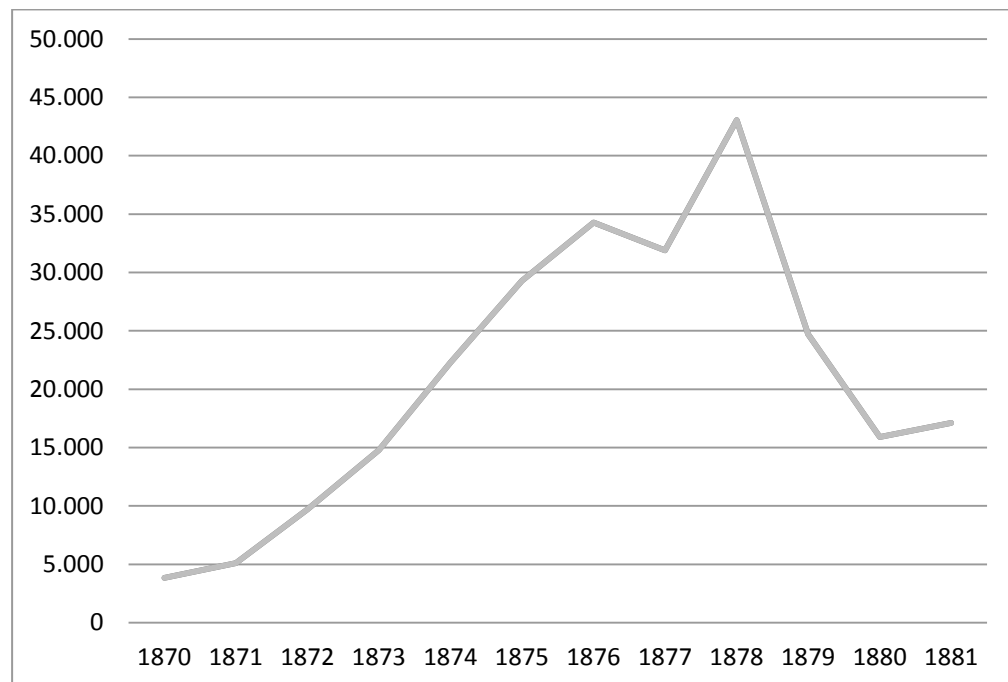
In the 1870s, due to new modes of recruiting and also on account of the opening of other routes/regions of recruitment, the slide of the late 1860s was considerably arrested. From an annual average of around 5,000 recruits in

²⁰⁸ *Assam Labour Report* 1879 p.13, p.18.

²⁰⁹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.236.

²¹⁰ S. Baildon, *Tea in Assam: A pamphlet on the origin, culture, and manufacture of tea in Assam* (Calcutta, 1877) p.50.

1870, the numbers steadily rose to above 30,000 in the period after 1875, reaching a high of over 40,000 recruits in the year 1878.



Graph 2.1: Labour Migration to Assam 1870-1881.²¹¹

2.7 Discourse of reform and the new contract regime

The 1870s was a period of sustained extension of the plantation cultivation and growth in the production of Assam tea. The rapid spurt in production did not automatically translate into an “independent” identity for Assam tea in its primary market (Britain), where it was still used to blend the Chinese supplies to give “body” and “flavour” to them. The inauguration and almost three decades of plantation production in the colony (Assam) had partially shifted the sites of cultivation of the plant and sources of its supply, but it could do little to redefine the notion and taste of the finished commodity—which still remained predominantly Chinese.

Such “anomalies” were being felt and concerted attempts were underway especially from the early 1870s—by various “interested” individuals, groups and “defence associations” to establish the “mark” and “taste” of Assam/Indian

²¹¹ Assam Labour Report for the years 1875-1882; *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.236.

tea (in the British market) and thereby stimulate its distribution and sale to a completely new level.

At the same time, the formation of trade associations (like the Calcutta Syndicate) was pushing the tea of Assam/Indian origin into the new markets of Australia and United States. For instance, due to the efforts of the Syndicate, the exports to Australia jumped almost three hundred percent in one year from around 870,000 pounds in 1881-82 to 2,710,000 pounds in 1882-83.²¹²

These trends of consolidation of varied interests in the marketing and sale of the Assam/Indian tea found parallels in the “association” of the tea production interests. The most prominent example was the formation of the Indian Tea Districts Association in London in 1879 with the object of acting as a common forum for those directly or indirectly interested in the cultivation of tea in British India.²¹³

A particular instance of such collaboration found expression in a memorandum drafted by a London group of businessmen and entrepreneurs interested in “Indian tea” in the year 1880. The memorandum, at very outset, underlined the necessity to buttress the presence of Indian tea in its existing market and coordinate attempts to break into newer terrains by expanding production, while at the same time, checking the “costs” at which Indian tea was being manufactured. The present and future nature of the tea market, it prophesied, necessitated that the finished commodity had to be decisively “cheap” to remain competitive with the other producing regions like Java and Ceylon, offering a similar product. Mechanisation, the memorandum further argued, as a potent solution to bring down costs had its “limitations” because of the peculiar nature of tea operation meant that ‘hand labour must always be

²¹² W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Empire: Its People, History, and Products* (London, 1882) p.507.

²¹³ Its stated goals were to ‘bring about a certain degree of concert and unity of action amongst owners and managers of tea property to cheapen the cost of production, improve the quality of the product, and increase the demand for it’ and to simultaneously ‘watch the legislation in India and England in so far as it affects the tea industry to procure such amendments and modifications of existing laws as may be found necessary for the realisation of the objects in view’. For details see R. Behal and P.P. Mohapatra: ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations’, 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, Special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3&4 (1992)

employed and it governs the cost of production'. Such an understanding pointed at the direction where the costs had to be controlled, as precisely mentioned in the text:

On the maintenance therefore of an adequate supply of *coolie* labour, at a cost calculated to leave a fair margin of profit on the capital invested, hinges the entire question of the future of the tea enterprise.

This notion of a labour/worker category as the key to the “future” of tea enterprise had a strange ring of familiarity to it. In the 1840s, the Tea Committee identified the skilled Chinese tea makers as that critical factor. The managers of the pioneer Assam Company in the 1850s reposed their faith on the Kacharis to assume the role of a stable resident working population. This view shifted by the late 1860s. The imported workers from outside the province (or the *coolie* solution) were widely believed to address the work concerns of a rapidly expanding industry. By the late 1870s, a cheap and unremitting supply of these *coolies* was seen as the fundamental issue. This opinion was reiterated by a Chief Commissioner of the province who believed that the Assam planters ‘to hold their own against the fierce competition of China and Ceylon must have *coolies* on reasonable terms’.²¹⁴ In fact, the memorandum explicitly mentioned that the ‘excessive cost of recruitment’ and ‘stringency of labour laws’ had made the Assam labour expensive. It called for ‘withdrawing the present restrictions of trade’ and allowing a ‘greater freedom of contract’.

“Freedom” and “removal of restriction”, demanded in the memorandum, was a reiteration of the state discourse with respect to Assam migration—as articulated in the labour legislation of 1873. The Act had proposed certain provisions to facilitate what it characterised as “free emigration” and “free recruitment” in light of “improving” communication between the recruiting districts and Assam.²¹⁵ This was also in tune with the idea of “progressive freedom” as the guiding purpose and intention of the contract. Free emigration was depicted as the “spontaneous” and “unsolicited” emigration of natives of

²¹⁴ F.H. Skrine, *Laborious Day; leaves from the Indian record of Sir Charles Alfred Elliott* (Calcutta, 1892) p.73.

²¹⁵ The passing of the Act was synchronous with the establishment of a through line of road from the recruiting districts of Bihar and Sonthalia to Dhubri. *Assam Labour Repot*, 1881 p.1.

India to Assam. The latter term (free recruitment) was intended to apply to a system of “inducing” individuals to emigrate. They were to be furnished with the “means” of doing so (by their potential employers) without the necessary supervision of the state machinery. But the Act did not permit the “freely recruited” individuals to be contracted under the terms of Assam contract. The anticipation here was to tap into the famine stricken regions by giving the distressed communities some “assistance” to reach the tea districts and work under the terms of the ordinary law or a civil contract. However, such attempts/schemes did not yield the desired results, as anticipated by the colonial state. While the “unsolicited” spontaneous migration was barely forthcoming, the inability of planters to “bind” the imported individuals under the terms of Assam contract after having ‘assisted’ and “financed” their inducement and transit was a serious deterrent towards “free recruitment”. The planters feared that the new labourers could be “enticed” away by the liberal offers from other employers, or they could plainly decline to be contracted (even under Act XIII) except on offer of a substantial bonus.

In light of these arguments and other suggestions made in the memorandum, the colonial state set up a committee to comprehensively assess the working of the Act of 1873.²¹⁶ The investigating Commissioners in the report faulted the legislation for having failed to deliver on certain crucial counts. With respect to migration of workers, the Act was seen as not affording “sufficient” encouragement for free emigration and putting unnecessary restrictions on the desired *sardari* recruitment. While on the plantations, it was found wanting in the enforcement of contract and for offering insufficient “protection” to the employers for unlawful absence, idleness or desertion of contracted labourer.²¹⁷

The substance of these criticisms alluded to a skewed view of “freedom” (like that of “protection”)—which should operate selectively and for the interests

²¹⁶ The committee was appointed in October 1880 and it commenced its sitting in December 1880 with A Mackenzie as its president. *Assam Labour Report*, 1880, p.1.

²¹⁷ Proceedings of the Commission appointed to amend the Labour District Emigration Act VII (B.C.) of 1873; The Report of the Commission on the Labour Districts Emigration Act. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.227, January 1882. NAI.

and objectives of plantation-capitalism. While the labour market was to be made more free/deregulated through the removal of restrictions on recruitment and in particular for the *sardars*; the plantation labour regime was desired to be further “intensified” by the strict enforcement of contracts and more comprehensive scope for penalisation. This ostensible contradiction of reconciling “freedom” with “unfreedom” became the premise and purpose of the new Act—Act I of 1882.²¹⁸ The deliberations leading up to the legislation of the Act were also noteworthy for having received unprecedented attention from the native intelligentsia (especially Bengali), who were voicing their opinion in the legislature, political associations and the press about the nature and function of the British rule in India.²¹⁹

A prominent focus of the committee framing the Act narrowed on the *sardar*—as the desirable agent of “freedom” in the system of recruitment for Assam tea gardens. There was some disquiet within the committee for what it characterised as a “suspicious” premise of the state and planters, which was perceived to have stigmatised and impeded the *sardari* system. The suspicion, it was contented, stemmed from the attitude of state—which obligated the *sardars* to obtain a certificate of recruitment with a validity of not more than six months, compelled them to have these certificates countersigned in the recruiting districts by the magistrate and further did not authorize them to carry more than twenty recruits without going through the “policed” channels of the contractor’s depot.²²⁰

The relevant sections of the Act regulating the *sardari* system tried to resolve this dilemma. It extended the period of the *sardari* certificates to one year,

²¹⁸ Proceedings of the Commission appointed to amend the Labour District Emigration Act VII (B.C.) of 1873; The Report of the Commission on the Labour Districts Emigration Act. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.227, January 1882. NAI.

²¹⁹ Lt Governor of Bengal during the discussion leading up to the legislation remarked that the ‘subject (of Assam labour legislation) has been discussed in 1862, 1865, 1867, 1870, 1873, 1878 without causing considerable opposition on the part of the native community’ and now he was ‘surprised by the active and tardy native opposition’. Extract from the Abstract of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Governor General of India, dated the 5th July 1882 in Legislative Department Proceedings, no.307, January 1882. NAI.

²²⁰ Proceedings of the Commission appointed to amend the Labour District Emigration Act VII (B.C.) of 1873. NAI.

terminated the compulsion of getting these certificates countersigned by the magistrate of the recruiting districts or bringing the *sardari* recruits to them for registration. The *sardars* were further given the “freedom” of registering the recruits at any ‘convenient’ place, provided they did that before they left the province of Bengal. The restriction on the number of recruits was also lifted—with a general “advisory” that every gang of twenty should be guided by a ‘responsible person’. But the authority to issue the recruiting certificate remained with the planter and they were further entitled to prolong them (beyond one year) by merely intimating the protector/inspector. These certificates also listed instructions from the planters and a deviance on the part of the *sardar* could initiate severe prosecution and penalties. The practice of stationing a representative of planter/tea Company in the recruiting districts—the so called Local agent—was legitimised by the Act, and they were assigned with powers to oversee the activities of the *sardar* during recruitment and given the authority to charge them for any misdemeanours. These measures and especially the legalisation of the local agent had a significant bearing on how the “reformed” *sardari* system functioned and flourished.²²¹

Along with the ‘reformulation’ of the *sardari* mode of recruitment, the Act attempted to recast the Assam contract, further underlining the partial “freedom” and limited “protection” it claimed to champion. A long standing demand of Assam planters to have the period of contract extended from three to five years was now encoded in the new Act. A five year contract was admitted by the inaugural 1861 Act, which was later reduced to three years in the 1865 Act—considering the “unsettled” conditions of plantations. The subsequent Acts of 1870 and 1873 retained the three year ceiling for contracts. The proposed extension of the contract period drew its substance from a standard justification of the planters—that a period of three years was grossly inadequate to recoup the colossal sums “invested” in the recruitment, transit

²²¹ An outright prohibition on the contractor system was however ruled out on apparently “humanitarian” considerations—that it would be a serious injury to the many individuals deriving their livelihood from it. But the committee admitted to the pressure/reason for the toleration of this ‘evil’ on the grounds ‘(that) there are some gardens which are not yet in a position to employ *sardari*-recruiters and must for the present depend upon professional assistance’. The Report of the Commission on the Labour Districts Emigration Act. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.227, January 1882.

and settlement (medicine, housing, and infrastructure) of the workers. This was further seen as a logical extension for the Assam plantations, considering the contract for overseas plantations already extended up to five years.²²²

The hike in the contract period and the parallel drawn with the overseas plantation attracted the attention of some native organisations, especially the British Indian Association, who were voicing their reservations to the proposed changes being made to the Assam *coolie*-labour system.²²³ They cited to the different “principle” motivating the overseas contract, where the wage structure was gradually incremental, and the *coolies* received food rations along with their cash payments. The Assam contract in contrast had stagnant minimum wages till the third year, and only in the last couple of years did the wages increase slightly. Rations were rarely provided to the contracted workers in Assam, and the cost of the “benefit” of rice supplies was always deducted from their earnings. This alteration, as the association precisely identified, was designed to curb the bargaining capabilities of the labourers in negotiating higher wages after the expiry of their contract term (i.e. 3 years) and the cash advance (bonus) they received when they reengaged under the only applicable contract (Act XIII). This became even more evident when the sections extending the contract period made it abundantly clear that the labourers were no longer engaged for a particular tea garden but to an employer/company. This allowed the planters/companies to freely “relocate” their workforce to new, unhealthy gardens, which was not permissible under the terms of the earlier legislation.

The right to private arrest, as retained in the present Act, most starkly compromised the self-proclaimed objective of promoting “freedom.” The anomaly was lambasted by the British Indian Association when they equated the private arrest rights with the “fugitive slave law”. Responding to such

²²² In the late 1870s, the Sanitary Commissioner of Assam trying to explain the differential rates of mortality between the colonial *coolies* and Assam *coolies* argued that the ‘shortness’ of contract gave little interest to the Assam planters.

²²³ Memorial dated 3rd January 1882 from A.M. Bose, Secretary, Indian Association addressed to Governor General of India. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.308, January 1882; Letter dated 4th July 1882 from Kristo Das Pal, Secretary, British Indian Association to Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Legislative Department. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.306, January 1882. NAI.

grave charges, the tea association merely reminded them that ‘such a power has existed since 1865’.²²⁴ The colonial state firmly backed this retention and cited other “exceptional” circumstances where a similar “privilege” had been invoked.²²⁵ An influential section of the Assam administration was very much in favour of allowing a far greater scope than what was permissible in the existing private arrest rights, giving in to the pressures exerted by the planters, who were systematically assuming the magisterial prerogatives. For instance, the Chief Commissioner of the province wanted the obligation of the “arrested” *coolies* presented before the local magistrate to be abrogated, while the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang in Assam Valley expressed a view that the managers should be given an absolute right to arrest irrespective of the prevailing circumstances.

The sections of the Act regulating the private arrest rights underwrote the compromise between the various positions and pressures. The Assam managers retained the right to arrest when their plantations were situated at a distance of more than ten kilometres from the nearest police station. But the subsequent formality of reporting the cases of “private” detentions to the police did not automatically lead to a magisterial enquiry. The magistrates were now instructed to act only if they deemed it to be absolutely “necessary”.²²⁶

This control on labour was further achieved through a “realignment” of the domains and nature of the contract(s)—by which different categories of plantation labourer (local, imported, time-expired) was settled on the Assam tea gardens. The Act XIII contract—which from the early 1860s had offered a degree of “control” to the planters engaging local labourer and also helped

²²⁴ Letter dated 4th July 1882 from Kristo Das Pal, Secretary, British Indian Association to Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Legislative Department. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.306, January 1882. NAI.

²²⁵ It was suggested that since the year 1854, British ship captains were empowered to ‘arrest’ the deserting seamen and other apprentices without a warrant. Section 66 of Burma Labour Law Act III of 1876 also allowed ‘private arrest’ under certain conditions. Legislative Department. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.227, January 1882. NAI.

²²⁶ Also the penalty imposed on managers for ‘illegal arrests’ of *coolies* was substantially downscaled from Rs five hundred to only Rs fifty, when the existing law of the land imposed a seven rigorous imprisonment for a comparable offence committed by the other ‘ordinary’ subjects. Legislative Department Proceedings, January 1882. NAI

mitigate the planter's paranoia of the time-expired labourer slipping outside the ambit of the contract (Assam contract), came to be variously perceived in this changed context as ineffective, insufficient and even inapplicable. The enhanced stature of time-expired labourers was often cited by the planters as a case in point—where they were depicted as becoming 'the master of the situation' and capable of 'dictating' terms of their re-employment (wages and bonus), when contracted under the Act XIII.²²⁷ The legal limitations on the applicability of Act XIII for plantation labourers—which never deterred the planters to prolifically use it in the first place—now became an excuse for a concerted demand of "protection" beyond it. Also the critical question of the necessity of some hold over the "freely recruited" individuals—which was seen as the principle shortcoming of the 1873 Act—was still unresolved.

The proposed 'remedy' of permitting the execution of Assam contracts in the labour districts of the province, was encoded in the sections 111 and 112 of the 1882 Act. Under Section 111, the Assam contract could be enforced on the plantations itself, and subsequently forwarded to the Inspector for verification and registration. Section 112, on the other hand merely required the employer or his appointed representative to appear with the contracting labourer before the local Inspector or Magistrate for the formalisation of the contract.²²⁸

The redefined procedure of the Assam contract—which paved the way for the "freely recruited" labourer to be brought within its scope—had serious ramifications on the legal control over the local labour market (comprising of the time expired *coolies* and Kacharis). The workers in the province could now be legitimately put under the terms of Assam contract and therefore become

²²⁷ A planter argued that it seems unfair that a man who has been put to no expense in bringing up the labour should be able, by the promise of an additional rupee a month to their pay, to "entice" away his neighbor several time-expired coolies. G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.158.

²²⁸ Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India, Revenue and Agriculture Department, nos.16-18E, dated 27th January 1882. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.312, January 1882. NAI.

subject to a longer period of engagement (of up to five years) with similar penal penalties (like the private arrest) as the newly imported workers.²²⁹

2.8. Practice of Free System

The “free system” in the Assam plantations, which the 1882 Act claimed to further and facilitate, had fundamental inbuilt biases. At one level, the labour market and plantation labour regime was sought to be ‘freed’ from the prevailing edifice of rules and regulations. This was done at the behest of tea interests, who were clamouring for unprecedented ‘reforms’ and ‘deregulation’ of the system, which they believed was imperative to fully realise the curbed potential of the Assam tea industry. This they argued would stimulate a period of unprecedented productivity and profitability in the enterprise and address the local challenges and the global competition which the industry had to contend with in the late nineteenth century.

At another level, the freedom of the plantation labourers—who were bound by a more coercive, intrusive and partial contract—was gravely compromised. A degree of labour protection and a notion of labour entitlement—which the

²²⁹ There were other moves to overhaul the obligation and oversight on the management with respect to the conduct of work and life on the plantations. Sections 112-116, took a decisive step in this direction by relieving the employers of the necessity to submit the task schedules. The brief of the labour inspectors regarding this issue was now restricted to an order of reduction of tasks as and when they found them to be “unreasonable”. This move was part of a long drawn process of restructuring of work and wage assessment practices on the Assam plantations, where the time rate of payment was initially made redundant under systematic duress from planters, in favour of a more ambiguous task rate assessment. Now, the fixation of tasks itself was rendered arbitrary and largely unregulated. Again the supply of rice to the contracted labourers at a fixed price was a critical item in the ‘non-wage benefits’ established through the protracted negotiations of Kachari labour with the Assam Company management and later incorporated within the “protective” clauses of the Assam contract. Under the terms of the reworked contract, this benefit was no longer mandatory. The alteration was reasoned on the grounds that in anticipation of a larger proportion of “flour eating” labourers from Bihar and North Western Provinces migrating to Assam in the coming years, such an obsession with rice supplies was anachronistic and unnecessary. Even the regulation instituted in the “unsettled” years of the 1860s—to penalise the gardens/settlements with chronically high mortality, by barring them from participating in any further labour recruitment or even complete closure—was being refashioned to create a window of opportunity for the defaulting plantations to persist under these life threatening circumstances. Sections of the Act, reiterating certain conclusions reached by recent debate and legislation on the issue, made the provision of certifying the running of ‘sick’ plantations, when the death rates of only a particular class or race breached the ‘acceptable’ limits. The restriction in such cases merely extended to the recruitment and settlement of the race/class of labourers in question. Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India, Revenue and Agriculture Department, nos.16-18E, dated 27th January 1882. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.312, January 1882. NAI.

earlier legislations had constructed—were reversed in favour of a far greater latitude to the management to discipline labour, intensify work and execute other ‘cost cutting’ measures. The arrogation of unilateral and unchecked authority by the plantation managers, which had become very evident from the beginning of the contract period, was thereby given more credence and legitimacy. The implementation of the 1882 Act—which came to force on 6th January 1882—most starkly revealed these latent tendencies, conditioning the strategies and practices through which tea and coolies were produced on the Assam plantations.

From the early years of the operation of the Act, there appeared a very discernable trend—especially in the tea districts of Assam valley—of putting the locals and time-expired labourers under Assam contract. At the same time, a vast majority of the newly recruited individuals from outside the province were brought by *arkattis* and *sardars* as ‘free emigrants’, and then put on a longer Assam contract in Dhubri in Goalpara district—the main point of debarkation for gardens of Assam valley—which interestingly was elevated to the status of a labour district, without actually indulging in any planting operations.²³⁰ The aspirations of tea planters to include a greater proportion of labourers (local, time-expired, imported) within the domain of the Assam contract, but stay clear of the corresponding rules and regulations, were thereby simultaneously served.²³¹ The provincial labour report for the year 1883 admitted to these specific fallouts of the Act:

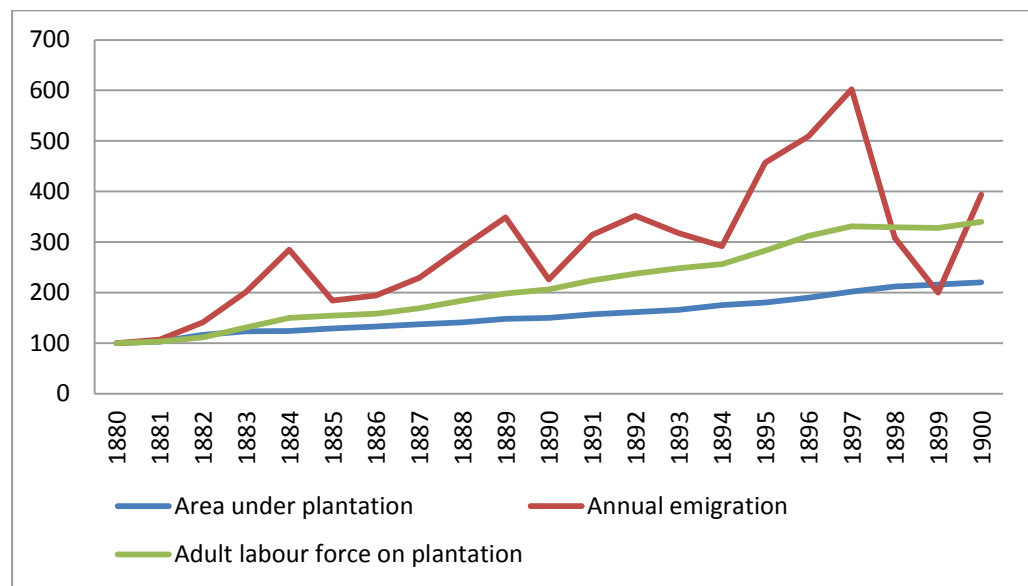
... Alteration which the new act has brought in its train was hardly foreseen by its framers, and has been effected almost by accident. The law intended that recruitment by contractors and garden-sardars should be under careful restrictions, but that free emigration should be encouraged. The outcome has been that both contractors and sardars have evaded the provisions of the law, and have to a large extent brought in

²³⁰ There was a distinct trend of contracts being enforced for a longer period in Dhubri than on the plantations. For instance in the year 1887, more than 96 percent of contracts executed in Dhubri was for 5 years, while in the other labour districts it was merely 2.8 percent. Again in the year 1888, 98 percent of contracts in Dhubri were for 5 years. The report for the relevant year making a distinction between the two plantation valleys, mentioned that in Assam valley around 36 percent and in Surma valley not more than 2 percent of new contracts were for a period 5 years. *Assam Labour Report*, 1887 p.18; *Assam Labour Report*, 1888 p.23.

²³¹ In the year 1883, the of Assam narrated the case of seventeen workers who complained of having been forced to sign a five year contract on the garden, when they had originally taken a three year contract. *Assam Labour Report*, 1883 p.23.

their recruits as free emigrants. Not a single contractor's *coolie* was brought under contract into the Assam valley in 1883.²³²

The contention of the report with respect to these features manifesting inadvertently and not by design, is hardly sustained by other circumstantial evidence. Apart from bringing in a far greater number of plantation labourers—belonging to different categories and contexts—within the contract framework, the ‘deregulation’ in the labour market quickly multiplied the number of migrants going to Assam.



Graph 2.2: Comparison on area under plantation, labour force and emigration on Assam tea gardens: 1880-1900.²³³

The spurt in labour recruitment—which largely sustained throughout the late nineteenth century— was not an obvious outcome of the “simplification” of the bureaucratic procedures, opening up of “virgin” territories for recruiting and inclusion of other newer groups of recruiters and recruited within the process. In fact, this period was witness to a greater encouragement and even a sort of institutionalisation of practices like deception, abduction and

²³² By the year 1886, free emigration was both actually and relatively more active than in any previous year. The emigration under the other systems having fallen to the lowest numbers recorded for the five years. *Assam Labour Report*, 1883 p.1; C.E. Buckland, *Bengal under the lieutenant-governors; Being a narrative of the principal events and public measures during their periods of office, from 1854 to 1898* (Calcutta, 1901) p.765.

²³³ M.A.B. Siddique, *Evolution of Land grants and Labour Policy of Government* (New Delhi, 1990) p.143.

kidnapping in the labour market. These practices—generously contributing to the inflating number of migrants—became extremely feasible due to the same relaxation of the regulations and dilution of supervision. Planters and their agents in the labour market had ample scope and freedom to rampantly and systematically incorporate them in their standard recruiting strategies. The lack of governing ‘norms’ and concern for larger profits, further encouraged the labour intermediaries to pay little regard to the sanitary principles during the transportation of people to Assam. The rising rates of mortality during labour transit attested to this developing phenomenon.

It was thought that the time had arrived when emigrants might be expected to come to Assam in large numbers without much assistance, or at all events without the stimulus and aid of the elaborate organization then provided by the professional supplier of labour, and that the system of contractors, arkattis, and so forth, would in time die a natural death; but, instead of this, the great and ever increasing mass of the labour supply business has remained in the hands of the professionals, with this difference, that, whereas formerly these persons worked under strict regulation and control, they now under the "free emigration" system work free from all control.²³⁴

The escalation of cases of deception by the recruiter, widespread abduction and massive labour deaths were strikingly reminiscent to the ‘pre-regulation’ period of the early 1860s—which became the ‘original’ context and premise for the colonial state to intervene and establish some rules and standards. The latest phase of “deregulation” and its ramifications generated deep concerns in the migrating regions and contributed to the “unpopular” perceptions of Assam—a phenomena which we will engage with in another chapter. At the same time, the “native” press (especially in the province of Bengal) got particularly interested in the ‘question’ of Assam *coolie* labour. One of the central themes of this engagement was the many cases of recruiting abuses in the Bengal districts—especially with respect to the abduction of single woman to Assam—which appeared with recurring frequency in the newspaper columns.²³⁵

²³⁴ *Assam Labour Report*, 1887, p.2.

²³⁵ S. Sen, ‘Commercial recruiting and Informal intermediation: Debate over the Sardari system in Assam tea plantations, 1860-1900’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010)

2.9. Free System in Surma Valley

The provincial administration faced with dissenting and critical voices from within its ranks and the broader colonial society, continued to refute them in the annual labour reports—as being isolated, inconsequential exceptions and emphasized the larger ‘good’ and long term ‘benefits’ the ‘free system’ had brought in its wake.²³⁶ The Secretary of State for India concurred with this position in an official correspondence in August 1886 agreed that ‘the most important change which the present Act (1882) effected was the encouragement of assisted (sometimes called free) emigration by relieving it from the legal trammels until the *coolies* reach the labour districts’. This position was reiterated during the course of some official and legal debates initiated to discuss the workings of the 1882 Act, which had gathered some momentum in the late 1880s. The member in charge of a Bill introduced to amend the 1882 Act, which was later passed into law as Act VII of 1893 concluded:

The result of this protracted investigation has been not only to show that the continuance of the labour system established in 1882 is essential for the well-being of the industry, which has done so much towards colonising and opening out the rising province of Assam... It has been expressed again and again by successive Chief Commissioners and other impartial observers, that the condition of labourers on tea-gardens is far superior to that of the masses in the districts from which they emigrate...The continuance of the system established in 1882 is still required as a means towards drawing-off the surplus population of the recruiting areas and opening-out the sparsely peopled districts of Assam.²³⁷

A special report on the working of the 1882 Act—published in the year 1890—was the most comprehensive statement made in favour of the free system. Drawing a distinction between the labour systems of the two ‘planting’ valleys of the province, the report made a case for the relative “freedom” of plantation

²³⁶ The Local administration under pressure of this criticism made some feeble attempts to comprehend the problem and its magnitude, but rarely took the corresponding measures. For instance in the year 1888, the Chief Commissioner of the province issued two circulars instructing the district heads to make enquiries into the complaints of fraudulent recruiting and also to submit the result of these investigations every two months. *Assam Labour Report*, 1888 p.11.

²³⁷ C.E. Buckland, *Bengal under the lieutenant-governors; Being a narrative of the principal events and public measures during their periods of office, from 1854 to 1898* (Calcutta, 1901) p.948

labourers in the Surma Valley.²³⁸ It was suggested that the workforce in this valley was mostly recruited through the informal ties and familial networks of the sardars working outside the Act, and later settled without any contract or under the “less harsh” Act XIII contract on the plantations.²³⁹

This was a shift on the position on Act XIII—which as we have argued was seen as ineffective and even inapplicable on the Assam plantations in the late 1870s. This seemed to have encouraged the Chief Commissioner of the province Charles Elliot to make a proposal to withdraw it completely from the province, which formed the subject of Government of India despatch, dated 17th July 1886, to the Secretary of State of India:

...provisions (in Act XIII) were not less severe than those which attach to a contract under Act I, while they fall very much short of that act in the safeguards which they furnish for the due understanding and execution of his engagement by the labourer, and in their omission to require from the employer any compensatory advantages in the provision of cheap and suitable food, good lodging, maintenance when sick and reasonable wages, such as secured to the labourer by the Labour Emigration Act.²⁴⁰

The Secretary of State concurred with the Home Government about the doubtful legality of the application of Act XIII to tea *coolies* and welcomed the proposal of the Home government to consult the Chief Commissioner of province in taking steps for its repeal.²⁴¹ But in an surprising volte-face, the Home government, in a despatch dated 5th October 1891 to the Secretary of State, came round to the view that though being objectionable only in principle, the Act XIII contract had been “harmless and even beneficial” in its actual operation. A case was made of it being employed, not as an instrument for exacting unreasonable contracts, but as a “more lenient and popular penal contract law, from the labourer’s point of view, than the Act I of 1882.” It was seen as serving the long avowed objective of the government of being a

²³⁸ The report argued that the two valleys (Assam and Surma) ‘present important differences of procedure both as regards the mode of recruitment followed and the form and period of contract. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.8.

²³⁹ For instance in the year 1887, there was not even a single Assam contract signed locally in Sylhet for a period more than 3 years. The corresponding figure for Cachar was only 79. *Assam Labour Report*, 1887 p.17.

²⁴⁰ *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906).

²⁴¹ In a letter dated 4th November 1886 from the Secretary of State for India to Government of India., Working of Inland Emigration Act, 1882.

“transitional stage between strict penal contracts and a system of civil contract under the ordinary law”, for the Assam plantations.²⁴²

What provoked the colonial state take such a favourable opinion now; when only a few years back it was most determined to do away with what it described as a “harsher contract than Assam contract.”? Apparently this striking shift in the official rhetoric was conditioned to a large extent by the local enquiries of the successive Chief Commissioners of the province, who were quite appreciative of its “positive” value, favouring its retention.

One of Chief Commissioners, W.E. Ward, had gone to the extent of describing the *coolie* under Act (Assam Contract) as practically a “slave”, who had no choice but to serve out his/her terms of contract regardless of the conditions of the garden or the treatment meted out to him/her by the planter. Act XIII *coolie*, in contrast, was seen to have this ‘freedom’ of leaving the gardens if treated badly by the planters. The planters were said have no “satisfaction” in putting them behind bars for three months (the punishment for breach of contract), after which the *coolie* could legally refuse to return to the garden.²⁴³

Again, Chief Commissioner Quinton in a special report for the working of Act I in the years 1886-89 drawing a long list of the “benefits”, argued that there were less deaths, less desertions, less judicial punishment among Act XIII *coolie*, and also the wages earned were higher than their Act I counterparts. He was quite unequivocal in his statement that:

It [Act XIII] places the *coolie* in a position of considerably greater independence and enables him to exact his own terms more easily than his fellow labourer bound by contract under Act I of 1882.²⁴⁴

Now, why would officials as highly ranked as the Chief Commissioners describe a contract without protective clauses as stimulating a freer, well-paid workforce; while the specially carved out “official” Assam contract, with all the elaborate provisions backed by an efficient official machinery, as to perpetuating slavery!

²⁴² *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906).

²⁴³ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration A, 1-5/26/459, 1888, NAI.

²⁴⁴ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.156.

The discourse of “freedom” did not acknowledge the different contracting strategies particularly observed the significant value of Act XIII had for the Surma valley plantations; holding out to the planter come security ‘above the ordinary law’ for the expenses incurred. The district level officials of the valley had always expressed this opinion in their annual labour reports, that the Act was very “popular” among planters and any moves to take them away would meet with the sharpest opposition. Such concerns were confirmed when the resolutions passed in a public meeting of Cachar tea planters, held in Silchar in May 1887, and most emphatically protested against the anticipated repeal of Act XIII.²⁴⁵ The obvious paradox of the entire state of affairs was that, here, the planters were craving for the retention of an ambiguous contract, which neither gave the employer the “legal” right to private arrest nor the luxury of a long-term contract. Much of the official explanation, for this “decision” on the part of managers and planters was their realisation of complications and expenses arising out of Assam contract recruiting. It was said to cost more because of the delays and formalities required. Also the obligation to attend certain fixed places were said to offer the *coolies* the opportunity to be “enticed” away by contractors or other recruiters.²⁴⁶ These explanations sound inadequate, and would be equally applicable to the other valley of Assam, where the recruitment under the Assam contract during the 1886-88, period was as high as 88 percent.²⁴⁷

This brings into clear relief, the specific geographical and social terrain of the Surma valley, which attracted certain “natural” streams of labour that the valley of Assam was perpetually deprived of. The superior accessibility and networks of communication of the valley opened spaces for “informal” modes of labour recruitment. Also a fair amount of agriculture and human concentration in the valley meant that there were other inducements for the migrant in taking a decision to move into these regions. Managers of the

²⁴⁵ *Indian Tea Association Report*, 1888 pp.64-70.

²⁴⁶ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.13.

²⁴⁷ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.21.

valley, especially in the Sylhet district, had over a period of time found a fair degree of success in procuring *coolie* by sending a number of *sardars* every year to their native districts. The *sardars* who received certain advances; recruited through their social and familial networks and arranging for their conveyance to the gardens without any governmental interference and outside the provisions of the Act. These *coolies* were then settled by Act XIII in the gardens, receiving the “bonus” amount on signing the contract. The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet and the Sub-divisional officer of South Sylhet even talked of cases where *coolie* in the Chargola valley region of Sylhet, recruited through *sardars* refunding the cost of their importation out of their wages or otherwise, and staying purely on a non-contractual basis.²⁴⁸

The coolie in a relatively advantageous circumstance could not have been forced into entering a more stringent contract. The attempts were met with a ‘resistance’ wherein there was a perceptible rise in the number of desertions; overall some 10 percent of workers absconded and in the district of Sylhet, 15 percent of Act labour escaped during the 1882-1885 period.²⁴⁹ Describing the increase in desertion of coolie a contemporary official of the district remarked, ‘that it is not at all a matter of regret’. It shows that ‘tea garden coolie have learnt to sell their labour power in the most profitable market, and are not mere adscripti glebae of the garden for which they were imported’.²⁵⁰ This bears out the “bargaining” capabilities of the labouring population in a region that was geographically well connected and where migration was through the garden sardars operating outside the legal institutional framework, mobilising ties of family and local society and networks of kinship. Also, in the ability of the coolie to “desert” it is important to appreciate differences in terrain of the two valleys. In the jungle tracts of the Assam valley with the large isolated gardens,

²⁴⁸ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) pp.12, 102-03.

²⁴⁹ R. Behal and P.P. Mohapatra: ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations, 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, Special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3&4 (1992) p. 163.

²⁵⁰ The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj subdivision cited in the *Assam Labour Report*, 1883.

the coolie was more likely to be “hunted” down, than in the comparatively crowded district of Sylhet and Cachar. The Deputy Commissioners of Sylhet and Cachar considered that there was very little difficulty in a coolie getting away if he wanted to.²⁵¹ The arkatti batches of Assam valley were not necessarily from the same social/familial background being a haphazard and random assortment of individuals. Here the Assam contract with its powers of private arrest was viewed as extremely necessary tool to deter them to desert and bind them to the plantations, even if that meant a higher price.²⁵²

While making these valid observations regarding the different strategies employed in the mobilisation and organisation of labour in Surma valley, the report chose not to explicitly admit that these features preceded the inauguration of the “free system”. Also there was hardly any elaboration as to how such “informal” practices were furthered or facilitated by the recent legislation. The case of Balisera gardens, at the heart of these processes, most strongly contradicted this freedom promotion outcome of the 1882 Act, as implied by the report.²⁵³

Balisera was a group of around fourteen gardens formed by a joint-stock company in the southern part of the Sylhet district (Surma valley)—where extension of tea cultivation had commenced with great fervour from the early 1880s. Like the several other new ventures in the province, these gardens could hardly boast of a stable and sustainable infrastructure to house and feed the growing resident population. Also the nature of work—involving the strenuous task of cutting through the thick forested tracts to make way for functioning plantations—put enormous strain on the workers. It was hardly unanticipated that the incidence of sickness and mortality was unnaturally’ higher in these gardens. This also explained the general proclivity of the stationed workers to leave these “unhealthy” sites. To counteract these “deserting” tendencies, the

²⁵¹ *Assam Labour Report*, 1886.

²⁵² *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.109.

²⁵³ About 1,900 *coolie* under the Act were imported in the district of Sylhet in 1885. Out of these 1,150 went to the subdivision of South Sylhet, where the South Sylhet Tea Company was opening out their new gardens. *Assam Labour Report*, 1886.

concerned company rather than investing in the development and improvement of the life supporting facilities, chose to go on a recruitment overdrive and brought far more workers within the framework of the Assam contract.

From the middle of 1880s, Balisera Company revised its policy of an exclusive reliance on garden sardars for labour supplies—which was proving to be grossly inadequate in this “udemanding” state of affairs. Professional labour contractors were now placed with “order” to provide the deficient numbers. The “free recruits” provided by the contractors were almost invariably put under Assam contracts, after their arrival on the tea gardens. This was made feasible by the modified procedures certified by the 1882 Act—ensuring a comprehensive hold of managers over their mobility and labour. Out of the total number of 2,600 Assam contracts accomplished in the district of Sylhet in the year 1885, around 2,200 were accounted just from the Balisera gardens. More than 90 percent of these agreements were concerning the labourers obtained in the same year.²⁵⁴

The calculated application of Assam contract by planters—to ‘settle’ newcomers, limit other threats of ‘losses’ of labour due to the circumstances arising from within or outside the plantations, and enforce the desired working patterns—were not the features of some “isolated” cases. In fact, they hinted at the contracting practices gaining ‘popularity’ in the plantations of both valleys—to attain the renewed drive for cultivation, production and the related intensification of labour—which were catalyzed by the provisions of the 1882 Act.

The “simplification” in the execution of the Assam contract implied a shift in the balance of contracts (Assam contract and Act XIII contract). The managers could now legitimately put any of the different categories of plantation labourer (local, time-expired or imported) under Assam contract, or generally

²⁵⁴ Again when the construction work of Assam Bengal Railway was extended to Chittagong in the late 1880s, the tea planters of the contiguous district (Sylhet) exhibited a much greater intent in checking the mobility of labourers to the potentially more remunerative public work employment. In the year 1889, the number of the locally executed Assam contracts in Sylhet district rose dramatically, touching the figure of 4,200—a large proportion (around 4,100) of which were again the new migrants. *Assam Labour Report*, 1889 p.13 and *Assam Labour Report*, 1890 p.16.

augment the proportion of such contracts, as and when they felt it to be necessary. This turned out to be particularly useful for plantations which were removed from the networks of communication and market (especially found in Assam valley), or chronically suffered from disease and deaths—to nullify the general ‘unsettlement’ found among the workers there.²⁵⁵ This made a missionary remark that whether ‘Act I (Assam contract) ever intended to tie men down to such conditions of life or death’.²⁵⁶ The managers tremendously valued the efficacy of Assam contract in “settling” the new and refractory labourers in the routines and discipline of plantation life and work.

The contracting strategies were again contingent upon the manner and conditions under which labour could be mobilised and supplied. In the case of Balisera gardens, the strategy of the management to counteract the worker disinclination and desertion was by supplementing their labour pool through recruitment, and bringing these new recruits under the hold of the Assam contract. The accomplishment of such a strategy rested heavily upon the services of the labour contractors—who were able to provide the large numbers, in addition to the smaller contributions made by the garden sardars. The contractors predominantly brought their recruits into the province as ‘free emigrants’, who were later put on contracts in Dhubri or the respective tea gardens. This further underlined the limitations of the colonial state’s contention—that contractors would become obsolete with the advent of the “free system” and the “empowerment” of sardars. Contractors remained pivotal to the continuation and perpetuation of the contract(s) regime in Assam.

2.10. Conclusions

The Assam planters often explained their relationship with the contractor/contractor system as “reluctant”—which was “forced” on them because of the “exceptional” nature of tea operations in the province and the

²⁵⁵ Barker noted that the contractor (curiously designated as Government agent) was resorted to when there was an immediate requirements to fill up vacant places of men whose agreements had expired and when there was a situation of opening out a new garden. G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.150

²⁵⁶ C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.59

pressing necessity of labour. They never missed an occasion to condemn the “excesses” of the *arkattis* and welcomed measures to permit the “honest” sardars to flourish. The free system apparently stemmed from such intentions. However, the complicity of the planters and tea industry in the expansion and penetration of the contractor system went beyond a simple relationship of necessity. The tea interests emulated, encouraged and participated in the system and its devious practices.

Firstly, they took measures to reinvent the sardar and local agents in light of the highly prolific roles of contractor and *arkattis* respectively. Secondly, they showed a stronger to push recruiting at any cost, which was made feasible by the ‘free system’. There were cases of Calcutta tea firms broadcasting free-recruiter licenses by the hundreds in districts of Eastern India. This authorized anyone and everyone—without verifying or even knowing their credentials—to obtain ‘free recruits’ for these firms.²⁵⁷

Thirdly, they showed little hesitation in entering the networks of contractor system, without any intention to arrest or transform its abusive nature, but with an interest to make it more suitable for the industry.²⁵⁸ The assumption of the “contracting” roles by the Local agent was a step in that direction. The case of Babu R.D. Mukherji is very instructive in this regard. Mukherji was a garden doctor in service of Scottish Assam Tea Company for more than two decades. Apart from his routine medical obligations, Mukherji was also delegated the task of “contracting” labour for his employees during the recruiting season. Like any other contractor in Midnapur (from where he operated)—Mukherji opened lines of communication and exchange with *arkattis* and other market intermediaries. The company expressed satisfaction because they got their

²⁵⁷ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906).

²⁵⁸ A particular instance was the formation of Tea Districts Labour Association in 1892 with the ‘object of taking over the various recruiting agencies and depots which had been set up and maintained previously by each Agency House or company. The association controlled both the operations of garden sardars and *arkattis*.’ Tucker hinted at the ‘firms in Calcutta’ who are agents of gardens in Cachar and purchase *coolies* in Calcutta cannot be ignorant of the fact that these *coolies* were intended for Dooars. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (London, 1957) p.182; *Government of India Despatch, dated the 22nd day of June 1889, with its enclosures, including Reports by Mr. Tucker; and of Memorial of the Indian Association of Calcutta, dated the 12th day of April 1888* (London, 1889).

supplies with lesser intermediation (so cheaper) and also the processes of verification and dispatch were discharged by their own employee (Mukherjee).

A similar strategy again came to the “official notice” during the course of a “surprise visit” of a professional contractor’s depot (named Hussain Khan) situated in Bilaspur (Central Provinces) by the local commissioner. The official found the existence of a well worked out arrangement operated by an assistant tea manager (acting like a Local agent) stationed in the depot, overseeing the regular delivery of recruits through the agency of his ‘sardars’ to the gardens of his employing company (Jardine, Skinner and Co). These “batches” were not the ‘friends and family’ of the sardars, but acquired through the ‘sources’ of Hussain Khan. The telegrams recovered during course of the inspection were very revealing: ‘Pay contactors for free *coolies*, if more sardars required wire’ and ‘Return to the garden as soon as possible, tells Hussain Khan to arrange eighty good *coolies*’.²⁵⁹

In this context it is productive to revisit the incidence of “rising costs” of recruitment, which was the feature of the early Assam recruitment and remained largely present in the ‘free recruitment’ period.²⁶⁰ Since the early 1860s planters complained that the poor communications modes, distance of the recruiting districts to Assam, obscene profit motives of the middlemen and several governmental regulations caused the recruitments costs to spiral and justified their inability to increase wages. However, neither the improvement in modes of communication (roads and railways), nor the comprehensive deregulation of recruitment (free sardari system and free contractor) significantly depress the expenditure on recruitment. This was primarily due to the fact that a combination of low wages and difficult living and working condition (or predominant conditions on Assam tea garden) was not a substantial encouragement to go there. This kept the intermediaries

²⁵⁹ In the 1890s, an assistant manager of Jorehaut Tea Company (named John Travers) also acted as a recruiting agent for his company. He was later made the company’s Superintendent of recruiters and organized sardari recruitment. H.A. Antrobus, *Jorehaut tea Company* (London, 1948), pp.321-22

²⁶⁰ Information as to increase in cost of importation of coolies, Revenue A, nos 77-117, August 1904, ASA

(contractors and sardars) interested, relevant and essential in the Assam labour market.

Costs in that scenario were determined by a “difficulty/risk scale”, where “duress” often became the only workable strategy for getting the required numbers for Assam tea gardens. The 1896 Labour Enquiry noted that the recruits from a similar social and geographical profile priced at twenty three rupees for the colonies were available only at fifty to sixty rupees for Assam. A colonial official investigating the systems of recruitment to Assam admitted that the contractor system had led to systematic abuses in the past and ‘it can only be defended on the ground that the tea industry cannot obtain sufficient labour in any other way’.²⁶¹

Apart from the strategies to externalise the recruitment costs (as in case of the reformed sardari system) and attempts to reduce the mediation costs (through local agents and other intermediaries), the planters and companies, in the long run, found that it was ‘cost effective’ to pay lower wages at a higher initial recruitment costs, than exercising the other possibility of paying higher (market) wages at a lower recruitment cost (as in case of colonies). This logic was underscored by a planter from Ranchi. He observed that ‘if the (Assam) planter would have to raise the *coolie*’s pay or pay bonus, (he) would save the price he now pays for his labour and add to *coolie*’s pay, (but) one result would be that popular gardens would have an advantage in the matter of labour as the labour would tend to go to good gardens, and the unpopular ones would suffer’.²⁶²

The contracts and peculiar plantation practices apparently tilted the balance heavily in favour of the planters. After being “contracted” the recruits often were in a disadvantageous position to bargain for employer, wages and working conditions. In a very candid note a local colonial official once noted that ‘(the) main effect of the Act (Assam contract) is to keep down wages without to any appreciable extent bettering the condition of the labourer’. He

²⁶¹ J.F. Gruning, *Recruitment of labour for tea gardens in Assam* (Calcutta, 1909) p.12

²⁶² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.17.

particularly favoured its abolition as he believed that ‘it was not part of the duty of Government to provide them (planters) with cheap labour’ and more crucially that it would stop binding down of newly-imported unacclimatised *coolies*, ignorant of the conditions under which they are to labour, to work for periods of three years or more on unhealthy gardens, where they have to choose between the risk of death if they stay, or imprisonment if they desert’.²⁶³ Such a view was reiterated by a commissioner of a labour district in the early twentieth century where he suggested that ‘the penal labour legislation (Assam contract), the strong feeling of *esprit de-corps* among the planting community, and their intimate social relations with the Government officials, all combine to put the employed at a disadvantage. They are neither given an economic wage when on garden, nor allowed to leave it when he can better himself’. The ‘unwritten law’ of his district, as he went on to argue, was ‘(that) once a tea garden *coolie*, always a tea-garden *coolie*’.²⁶⁴

Did these conditions in the modes of recruiting marked by excesses and on the plantations characterised by the “exceptional” privileges granted to the planters and backed by colonial state completely exhaust spaces of negotiation for the workers? Did tea coolies simply remain as tea coolies?

²⁶³ A missionary stationed in Assam valley talked about the ‘avowed policy’ followed by the plantations ‘that it pays better to drive a *coolie* hard during the time of his contract and then let him go, and import another, than to drive easy, on the bare chance of his willing to re-engage.’ SDO Karimganj, Porteous, *Assam Labour Report*, 1884, p.3; C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.31.

²⁶⁴ J. Johnston, D.C. Cachar to Secty to Chief Com, No 1658 E, Silchar 12th Dec 1903. Revenue A, nos 77-117, August 1904, ASA.

3. Unpopular Assam: Notions of Migrating and Working for Tea Gardens

3.1 Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of labourers from Chota Nagpur working on the Duars tea plantations were persuaded by their manager to join the ranks of a tea garden in Assam, where the manager held certain business interests. These labourers identified Assam as an *Agreement ka jagah* (place of agreement/contract), where they would never want to go.²⁶⁵ Around the same time, a colonial official persuaded a labour gang leader from Allahabad (North West Provinces) working on the railroad construction in Assam on the possibility of shifting their services to the tea gardens. The leader feared that even a mere mention of the word “tea garden” would create havoc among his workers.²⁶⁶ The panic took grave proportions in the case of few hundred Gandas, lodged in a district prison of Sambalpur in Orissa, when they were proposed to be relocated to Assam as coolies for the tea gardens. The Gandas threatened to slit their throats, if forcibly taken there.²⁶⁷

The geographically separated, socially differentiated and seemingly isolated episodes, in fact, hint at a range of anxieties which came to be associated and characterise the Assam tea gardens. This has to be situated in the context of changing nature of work organization in plantations, and intensified strategies

²⁶⁵ Perceptions of Assam as a place of agreement (contract) closely resembled the notion of *Girmitiyas* (people with *girmit* or agreement) associated with the indentured migrants to Fiji. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.148. B.V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origin of Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983); B.V. Lal, K. Fortune (ed.), *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopaedia* (Honolulu, 2000) pp. 110-111.

²⁶⁶ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906).

²⁶⁷ The Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 even proposed a more “proactive” strategy on the part of Assam plantations to induce the Gandas of Sambalpur who were described as ‘low caste weavers and day labourers addicted to thieving’ and numbering in excess of one hundred thousand. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) pp.37-38; *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906) p.150.

of work.²⁶⁸ Such anxieties, as the incidents suggest, engendered a sense of apprehension, fear and resistance in the people willing to go there. It came to be acknowledged by the colonial officials, tea agents, and missionaries, stationed in the recruiting districts, that Assam was extremely “unpopular” and generally had a “bad name”.²⁶⁹ This was a startling admission in light of the positive colonial constructions of Assam tea gardens, throughout the nineteenth century, as an attractive avenue for the overpopulated districts of eastern and northern India, perpetually trapped in the vicious cycle of deprivation, starvation and famine.²⁷⁰ The realisation, however, was

²⁶⁸ See Chapter 5 and 6 for details.

²⁶⁹ The 1906 Enquiry Commission found a widespread sentiment of unpopularity associated with Assam in the different recruiting districts. A construction engineer from Ranchi (Chotanagpur) opined that it was a way of frightening a person that he could be taken to a tea garden. Such proverbial “bad name” of Assam was noted by an English recruiting agent from Purulia. A labour contractor from Kharagpur (Bengal) felt that any kind of migration to Assam seemed unpopular. This closely resonated the opinion held by a missionary from Sambalpur (Orissa). The District Commissioner of Raipur (Central Provinces) mentioned that the idea of going to Assam was ‘something like being transported’. Some recent scholarship has argued in favour of allowing and exploring a closer connection between convict transportation and indentured migration. Drawing several examples from the overseas indentured migration, Anderson argues that such connection was not only expressed by contemporary colonial officials but ‘Indians also forged their own linkages, most particularly viewing migration through a prism of incarceration and transportation’. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.18, 24, 45, 48, 81. C. Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009); A. Yang, ‘Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, *Journal of World History* 14, no.2 (Fall 2003).

²⁷⁰ In light of the impending famine of Bengal in mid 1870s, a lecture delivered before the Society of Arts, the speaker strongly recommended ‘that the populous tracts visited or threatened by distress, unemployed labourers may emigrate to places where food is in comparative plenty...such as tea districts, the Doars, the provinces of Assam.’ One of the main objectives of “free recruiting” of the early 1870s was to tap into this famine distressed population and regions of Bengal and Bihar. In November and December 1873 several attempts were made by the local government in the districts of Saran and Tirhoot to encourage distressed families to go to Assam. This did not yield very positive results. Writing in the late 1880s, the Secretary to the Anglo-Indian Evangelization Society stressed that ‘the overcrowded districts in Bengal and elsewhere should be encouraged and helped to emigrate to Assam, where they might readily find lucrative and easy employment.’ Again the Empire review journal of 1901 mentioned that ‘Assam system has been beneficial to the Central Provinces, from the most famine-stricken portions of which, and from the poorest parts of Bengal, the Assam tea gardens are chiefly recruited.’ Frere, *On the impending Bengal famine: How it will be met and how to prevent future famines in India* (London, 1874) p.79; *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 11th February-4th March 1890 pp.1635-1636 ; *The Empire Review* 2, no.7 (August 1901) p.471. Also see, S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp.222-223; V. Damodaran, ‘Famine in a Forest Tract: Ecological Change and the Causes of the 1897 Famine in Chotanagpur, Northern India’, *Environment and History* 1, no. 2 (June 1995) pp.129-158.

necessitated by the mounting concerns that the reluctance and resistance in the migrating regions could threaten the sustained production of cheap, disciplined labour (*coolie*) for the plantation work process. It had become imperative to comprehend, control and counter it.²⁷¹ Such comprehensions were predominantly framed in the stereotypical notions of the irrational and ignorant mind-set of the “inferior” castes and “primitive” tribes migrating to Assam, and their gullibility to the disinformation spread by the moneylenders and the local landed elites who deterred them (their creditors and tenants) from migrating. The unscrupulous private recruiters—*arkattis*, were particularly singled out for perpetrating the fear, anxieties and distaste for Assam.

Keeping such issues in mind, this chapter suggests how different concerns regarding Assam tea garden collapsed in the overarching category of “unpopular”. This attests to a general disruptive impact of Assam tea gardens, which became an enduring legacy of the “free system”, accentuated by the abuses in recruiting and intensification of plantation life and work. The notions about *cha-bagaan* (Assam tea garden) ranged from it being a metaphor of hope and loss to a site of fear and deception.²⁷² The subsequent sections specifically focussing on the nature and substance of these perceptions does not suggest that such concerns were “absent” in an earlier period of migration and work on

²⁷¹ One of the earliest systematic attempts was a deputation of residents of Santhal Parganas (Chotanagpur region) being sent to Assam tea gardens under the supervision of the colonial officials and local planters to get a firsthand information of the conditions of work and life. The deputation interviewed around two hundred *coolies* from twenty seven gardens in Assam Valley. Some of the questions posed to the workers were: 1. How is the country?, 2. How is the soil?, 3. How is the water?, 4. Scale of daily work, length and breadth, 5. Rate of monthly wages for daily labour, 6. Rate of wages for contract work excepting Sundays, 7. Gardens whose *coolies* are in good condition, 8. Gardens whose *coolies* are not in good condition. The results of the visit did not give a good impression to the observers and the report was advised by some colonial officials and the chairman of the Indian Tea Association (James Buckingham) to be kept as confidential. Report of the deputation on the conditions of coolies in Assam gardens and Letter from G Toynbee, Commissioner Bhagalpur Division to Secretary of Bengal, General Department, dated 14th July, 1894. Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos. 1-4, NAI.

²⁷² Between 1871 and 1901 around 1, 80,000 individuals moved to Assam from the different districts. Special Causes of mortality of immigrant coolies, 1891-1901 in *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.235; H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974) p.50.

the tea gardens, but argues that it acquired a greater urgency and resonance in the late nineteenth century.²⁷³

Understandably, such constructions/negotiations was informed by the geographical, social and economic profile of the migrant groups and the histories of their migration, but points of overlap and intersections came to manifest over a period of time. Here, I find Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's emphasis on a "fuzzy" concept of labouring poor particularly useful. He emphasises a 'commonality among labouring poor in cultural terms, as it tries to cut through the various divides (especially wage/non-wage)'. In the language of this culture, as Bhattacharya argues, 'value is attached to poverty, indigence, destitution and hunger'.²⁷⁴

3.2 Assam as a Lost World

A recurring anxiety associated with the Assam *cha-bagaan* in the recruiting regions was a deep sense of loss. Numerous concerns were voiced regarding the many family members, friends and acquaintances who were taken there and never returned.²⁷⁵ Apart from rampant abduction and kidnapping practised with impunity by the recruiters, the "decision" to move for some seemed to be a "short-term strategy" or even an "act of desperation" induced by an inability to make a living at home or honour their mounting debts. The generous advances made by the recruiter and the hope of earning and saving some money in Assam addressed to that immediate crisis. Unlike some other destinations, where labour often "circulated" in search of employment and

²⁷³ See chapter 2.

²⁷⁴ S. Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor and their Notion of Poverty: Late 19th and Early 20th Century Bengal* (Noida, 1998); S. Bhattacharya, 'Introduction' in R.P. Behal & M. Linden (ed.) *India's Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c.1600-c-2000* (Delhi, 2007) p.11.

²⁷⁵ The idea and concern of non-return was very evident in the interviews conducted by the 1906 commission in the recruiting districts. This was a process which started from the early phase of Assam migration. For instance, in the late 1860s, around ten thousand people left for Assam tea gardens from Midnapur district in Bengal and they as '...a rule did not return.' Such a state of affairs continued well into the twentieth century. A colonial officer stationed in Bihar mentioned many cases of people coming up to him and saying 'My wife, or daughter or son has been taken off to Assam. How am I to find him?' *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.29, p.45, p.48, p.52, p.57, p.58, p.60; W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal, vol.III: Districts of Midnapur and Hugli* (London, 1876) p.52; *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Bihar and Orissa* Vol. IV, Part II (London, 1930) p.45

earning for varying degrees of time, *cha-bagaan* seemed to be a more permanent change: a point of no return.²⁷⁶

This immobility, as already discussed, was induced by the contract regime in Assam and the assumption of magisterial roles by the managers, who “claimed” disciplining and punishing coolies as their “right”. Also repatriation, an integral feature of the overseas indenture contract, was never allowed to be made mandatory in the Assam contract.²⁷⁷ Often, the time-expired labour, even if they managed to get a discharge certificate (*hathchit*) or considered “useless” for future engagement by the manager, were left stranded with little means to make the journey back home, even if they wished to.²⁷⁸ There were fears of people being forced and kept against their consent and will. Renewal of contract was particularly perceived to be made under duress and threat. Many futile attempts were made by family members to establish contact with their kin in Assam. The repeated assurances of the local tea agents affirming that their relatives were leading a good “settled” life in Assam, rarely calmed apprehensions.²⁷⁹

The hope of establishing contact in some regions of coastal Orissa came to be expressed in a faith that the God of Wind (*Ringesum*) would blow pieces of bones of those who were “lost” and died in Assam back to their villages.²⁸⁰ A rumour, circulating in the district of Sambalpur (Orissa), visualised the Assam

²⁷⁶ Saurabh Dube makes a distinction between seasonal and long term migration in Chattisgarh. Assam migration was perceived as if the individual has ‘...passed beyond their kin.’ S. Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950* (Albany, 1998) p.256.

²⁷⁷ *Report on the Conditions of Tea Garden Labour in the Duars of Bengal, in Madras and in Ceylon*. The position at the turn of the century was stated by the Secretary of State for India (George Hamilton). He categorically suggested that ‘...the contracts entered into by emigrants to Assam have never included any stipulation for repatriation, and none is considered necessary.’ *House of Commons Debates*, 23rd July 1903, vol. 126, c56.

²⁷⁸ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.93.

²⁷⁹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.81.

²⁸⁰ The anxieties of large scale migration from Orissa crystallised in a belief that the god of wind blew pieces of bones of those who died in Assam back to their villages. These pieces of bones took the form of whirlwinds which blew off house-tops and anyone encountering them would fall ill. V. Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (New York, 1955) cited in B. Pati, *Situating Social History: Orissa, 1800-1997* (Delhi, 2001) p.9.

tea managers systematically tying up the *coolies* to trees, lighting a fire beneath, roasting and eating them. On being told by some recruiting agents about the “improbability” of such a practice, the locals reasoned that how could they explain the thousands being taken to Assam without anyone ever coming back and neither the province (Assam) ever “filling up”.²⁸¹ The rumour graphically connected the overlapping anxieties of the loss of family members and acquaintances and the insatiable demands for fresh blood in Assam.²⁸² Another rumour from the district of Jabalpur (Central Provinces) portrayed *coolies* on tea-gardens being regularly boiled down for oil/oil being extracted from their bodies.²⁸³ The symbolism of extraction of oil from the *coolie* paralleled the sapping of the vitality of body and life on account of the grinding machine like work-regime on the tea-gardens. A common perception in the district (Jabalpur, Central Provinces) about the kind of work expected in Assam depicted *coolies* working in waist-deep water which usually resulted in their death in no longer than six months.²⁸⁴

The notion of “loss” in these rumours was also an allusion to the rampant sickness and death on the tea garden, agreeing with the idea of “unhealthy” Assam. In contrast to the colonial understandings of “unhealthiness”, which was framed almost exclusively in a climate/race/disease paradigm, these

²⁸¹In 1901, almost twelve thousand persons from Sambalpur were enumerated on Assam tea gardens which was greatly facilitated by the completion of Bengal-Nagpur railway line. The settlement report of the district estimated a much higher figure of migrants (around thirty thousand) to Assam in the last decade of the nineteenth century. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 37-38; L.S.S. O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Sambalpur* (2007, Delhi) p.54; *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sambalpur District* Calcutta, 1908) p.12.

²⁸² A “version” of this rumour can be traced during the plague panic in the late 1890s, among the mill workers of Bombay. Here it was believed that colonial officials were getting hold of men and boys, hanging them head downwards over a slow fire and preparing a medicine drawn from the head. Another version is found in of the “vampire stories” from East and Central Africa which narrates the capture of humans by the agents of colonialism to be hung upside down, their throats cut and the blood drained into buckets. See D. Arnold, ‘Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague’ in R. Guha and G. Spivak (ed.) *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988) p. 407 and L. White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000).

²⁸³ Two versions of this rumour were narrated. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.55, p.57.

²⁸⁴ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.58.

stories hint at the complicated yet connected repercussions of an exacting work-regime and gruelling conditions of life to account for it. The symbolic visualisation of “roasting” and “boiling”, further stressed the excessiveness and unreasonableness of the practices of discipline and work of cha-bagaan, were expressed in cultural idioms describing “exceptional” circumstances.

3.3 Problems of Life and Work on the Tea Gardens

The nuanced symbolism of the stories about Assam found resonance in the anxieties of *dukh* (State of unhappiness) and *taklif* (Problems) that animated the various anecdotes about the life on the Assam tea gardens and the “experiences” of people who had been there.²⁸⁵ Such accounts do unravel any unmediated subaltern/*coolie* perspective of plantation life, but indicate to a deepening anxiety in these regions, that the conduct of everyday life was outraged and rendered difficult on the tea gardens. *Dukh* and *taklif*, as the perceived condition of life on the tea garden, was not just informed by the “alienness” of Assam but also induced by the strategies of work, life and discipline in place on the plantations.

There were specific issues which were brought about by the circumstances of a new place and the changed climate, as expressed by some time-expired *coolies* from Chota Nagpur. Unlike a usual practice, they were unable to consume the rice cooked overnight for their morning meal. They found the water to be ‘different’ and saltish and believed it to be the reason for the frequent bowel complaints.²⁸⁶ There was some anxiousness about the persistent rains and excessive fever affecting their health. The leeches were

²⁸⁵ The expressions of *dukh* and *taklif* were apparently made by individuals having spent time in Assam and narrating the circumstances of work and life there. Here, common cultural codes of pain and anxiety were invoked to communicate a common sense of despair. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.32, p.74.

²⁸⁶ The notion that Assam had bad water was the unanimous opinion of two hundred odd workers interviewed by the Sonthali deputation of 1894. One member of the deputation, Sidhanta Desmanjhi attributed a reason to this inferiority where he noted that in Assam people drank well-water whereas back home they preferred water of river or streams. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.32. Translation of Deputation’s Report, Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos 1-4, NAI.

often seen as a nuisance and interference in the field work and there were demands of boots for protection.²⁸⁷

Dukh and *taklif*, induced by the changed context of place and climate, were compounded by the certain practices of the *cha-bagaan* being interpreted as a threat to social/cultural norms. For instance, the common boarding and dining between members of different caste/community during the long journeys to Assam (depots and steamers) and on the cramped residential quarters of the tea gardens (barracks and lines) were perceived as conducive for a potential “loss” of status.²⁸⁸ There were stories circulating in United Provinces about this lack of “caste-consciousness” of *cha-bagaan*—where a single individual was delegated to cook their food during steamer journeys and that “outsiders” were allowed free access to their kitchens on the gardens. The colonial state “responded” by legislating dry rations for some steamer routes; but this did not put an end to these apprehensions. Such fears were primarily but not exclusively voiced by the “upcountry” migrants, who held similar objections during their service in the army and the journeys to the overseas plantations.²⁸⁹ The threat of social ostracism, due the transgressions in Assam, often had to be mitigated through the performance of purification rites. For instance, a ritual called *Jati mandi* among the Ho tribe (Chota Nagpur) was marked by a communal feast arranged by the members of the tribe who had been to Assam to regain their lost status.²⁹⁰

The nature of tea garden had other possible implications on the conduct of everyday life. Some returnees noted that, on the tea-gardens, they usually had very little time for mid-day meals, except during *chaith* and *baisakh* (i.e. cold

²⁸⁷ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.32, p.34, pp.64-65.

²⁸⁸ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.64, p.66.

²⁸⁹ Carter cites instances of high caste emigrants refusing cooked food on board to Mauritius. They were given ‘dry rations’ instead. M. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi, 1995) p.102; S. Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company* (Delhi, 1995).

²⁹⁰ L. Burrows, *Ho grammar, with vocabulary* (Calcutta, 1915) p.164.

season/ non-manufacturing season).²⁹¹ Others had to subsist on a single meal against the customary two meals, as they were regularly put to tasks at end of the day.²⁹²

Kamjari, or the daily work routine (literally translated as continued work), of the tea-gardens systematically flouted the “legally” stipulated nine hour work day with an hour of rest in between.²⁹³ There were instances of work being carried from six in the morning till five in the evening, especially in the busy manufacturing season. During this period, the working day in the tea factories usually stretched well into the night, due to the increased pressures of meeting the stipulated production targets.²⁹⁴ Another peculiar “invention”—garden time—found in many tea-gardens of Upper Assam, extended the *kamjari* by fixing the garden clock ahead of the normal clock.²⁹⁵ The practices of prolonging the work day and intensifying the work process, integral to the plantation economy of the late nineteenth century, were generating instances of interference and potential breakdown of “customary” functions (eg. Meals) of everyday life.

Wages and remuneration on the *cha-bagaan* raised other concerns pertaining to life and work. The common practice on the tea-gardens of a combination of ‘task-rate’ assessment (daily tasks) and ‘time-rate’ payment (weekly/monthly payment) generated a degree of confusion, and many returnees felt that they

²⁹¹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.64

²⁹² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.87

²⁹³ See Chapter 5.

²⁹⁴ A planter’s composition titled ‘The Teahouse Bloke’ is suggestive in this regard: ‘the factory starts at 4 a.m., Oh Lord! Why ever did I come to this wretched job in tea...I have just to carry on and work right up to ten, and start the morning after, at 3 A.M. again’. W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935); M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928) p.95.

²⁹⁵ An Assam planter from the early twentieth century referred to “Deundi Time” – where he operated the clocks of the garden (Deundi) one hour ahead of the rest of the tea districts, ‘...so that the labour force could work their first hour in the cooler period of the day, before other garden’s labour had roused themselves from bed.’ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935). Also see S. Jain and R. Reddock (ed.) *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p.127; R.P. Behal, ‘Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule’ in R. Behal & M van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi) p.159.

had been “duped”.²⁹⁶ The task-work, in particular, open to different “interpretations” was seen with apprehension, and some colonial officials even realised its “unpopularity” during famine-work.²⁹⁷ Many time-expired labourers narrated their experience of task-work on *cha-bagaan*, describing the amount of work required to achieve a daily wage as “excessive”.²⁹⁸ An upward revision in tasks, for being much higher than in the past, was also felt by some with the result of a decline in their earnings.²⁹⁹ Sometimes, tasks were hiked as a mode of disciplining *coolies*.³⁰⁰ The penalties for falling short (short-work) and even for minor delays in attendance (muster) led to many deductions.³⁰¹ There were other apprehensions of being left with hardly any cash after the costs of “rice-benefit” (5 *seers* of rice per week) was charged from their wages.³⁰² At times of absence, due to illness, they were completely deprived of their “cash earnings” being just given a subsistence allowance or diet without any payment. But such periods of absence (*kuthia*) were added to the contract terms.³⁰³ Also the cost of recruitment was often recovered from the wages.

²⁹⁶ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.22, p.64.

²⁹⁷ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.58.

²⁹⁸ A contractor from Jubbulpore mentioned that some returnees told that the hoeing tasks on the garden—20 to 25 *nals* of 12 feet—are excessive. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.57.

²⁹⁹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.18.

³⁰⁰ In Santhali language the origins of the word *Dalil* which connoted extra work as punishment was traced to the tea gardens. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.57; A. Campbell, *A Santali-English dictionary* (Pokhuria, 1899) p.117.

³⁰¹ The members of the deputation that if the daily work was not done, a day’s wage (25 annas) was inflicted. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.57, p.87.

³⁰² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.69.

³⁰³ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.64, p.68. Practices of prolonging the term of agreement (as reported by officers in recruiting districts) by addition of *kuthia* days, or periods of absence was taken by Chota Nagpuri and Santali workers as a breach of faith.

These isolated instances indicate to the doubts and concerns about the “legitimate” possibilities of earning sufficient incomes that the *cha-bagaan* claimed to offer. Not only was the mode of assessment and payment perceived as “puzzling”, but also the work demanded to earn that wage was deemed as “excessive”. Again, such assessments were open to multiple interpretations and further enhancements. A general trend of increase in tasks with stagnant wages marked the intensifying Assam plantation economy in the late nineteenth century.³⁰⁴ Such limitations in the possibilities to earn were further constrained by the standard practices of deductions in place on the plantations. This only corroborated to the perception of the condition of life and ability to earn on *cha-bagaan* was difficult.

The “extraordinary” nature of the life on the plantations, as particularly induced by the practices of policing/disciplining, formed the substance of the “experiences” about the *cha-bagaan*. Various instances of confinement and extreme disciplining, even for “irrelevant” and “unjust” transgressions, raised anxieties and fear about the exceptional place. There were concerns of life being circumscribed in a compound system from where no one was ever permitted to leave.³⁰⁵ People were arrested and beaten for leaving the “compound”, even when they just wished to visit acquaintances and relatives on other gardens.³⁰⁶ The flogging and corporal punishments meted out by the manager and the native subordinates was inflicted even for trivial offences.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ In the year 1900, the Chief Commissioner of Assam demonstrated that the average wages paid (including benefits and overtime) were substantially less than what was prescribed by the inaugural contract Act (1865). The statutory wage at that point (Rs 5) was in fact half of what the daily labourer earned in Assam. Again between 1870s and 1890s, the tasks on tea gardens had generally increased from around twenty five to thirty percent. H. Cotton, *India and Home Memories* (London, 1911) pp. 261-262; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.49. For a discussion of wage trends in the twentieth century see R. Behal, *Wage Structure and Labour: Assam Valley Plantations, 1900-1947* (Noida, 2003).

³⁰⁵ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.69.

³⁰⁶ A report investigating the conditions of labour in Duars tea plantations noted that ‘...there can be no doubt that inter-garden movement of coolies are much commoner in the Duars than under the Assam system of indentured labour. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.76. *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p.24.

³⁰⁷ The members of the Sonthali deputation noticed a new woman worker being beaten by the assistant manager because she plucked four leaves instead of three. *Proceedings of Assam*

The life and activities of *coolies* were said to be at the complete disposal of the manager/tea-garden. *Coolies* were compelled to labour even when they felt unwell, and had to turn out for work during heavy rains.³⁰⁸ The female-*coolies* were not permitted to stay longer than four to five days at home after child-birth.³⁰⁹ During longer periods of illness *coolies* were encouraged to leave for the nearby *basti* to be tended by their caste/tribe people, but on recovery the managers compelled them to return to their “original” gardens.³¹⁰ Some expressed a sense of helplessness in their inability to leave the garden for which they had been contracted, even when they disliked it.³¹¹

The practices of control and immobilisation, critical to the production of cheap disciplined labour, were registered as infringements in the conduct of everyday life. The life of a *coolie*, as depicted in these experiences, entailed a loss of control over personal mobility, choice, well-being and a potential breakdown of relationships, interactions and social obligations. *Coolies*, in effect, were seen as not able to move as they wished, could not rest if they felt unwell, and were unable to keep in touch with friends and relatives. This sense of loss was induced and heightened by the practices of physical disciplining (even for irrelevant/minor transgressions) making it “exceptional”, “excessive” and generally “illegitimate”.

3.4 Songs and Oral Traditions of Tea Workers

The perceptions and anxieties about Assam tea gardens were also becoming a part of wider constructions of *cha-bagaan* as a site of “oppression” (places of

Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.87, p.64, p.17.

³⁰⁸ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.13, p.87, p.64.

³⁰⁹ This was again brought up by the Sonthal deputation where they were required to work within six days of birth. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.64.

³¹⁰ The missionary Dowding observed that contracts were cancelled when it was ‘...more profitable to send them home than treat them and give subsistence allowance.’ A transport fund instituted in the 1870s for such purposes was hardly enough and could fund the repatriation of only a few. C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.32.

³¹¹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.74, p.29.

dukh and *taklif*) articulated in other narratives sketching the life on the tea gardens.³¹² *Jhumur* songs, an important element in the oral/cultural traditions of tea labourers in Assam, indicates to one of the imaginings of the tea-garden. The nature of these songs can be illustrated through some extracts:³¹³

1	Assam Desher Chah Pat	Assam, the land of tea
	Pani Boli Bar Mitha	Where the water is supposed to be sweet
	Chal Sakhi Chal Jabo	Friends! Let's go
	Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane	We will pluck leaves on the gardens with joy
2	Chal Mini Assam Jabo	Mini, let's go to Assam
	Deshe baro dukh re	Our land is full of sorrow
	Assam deshe re Mini cha-bagaan horiyal	Mini, Assam is land of greenery and tea
	Kodal mara jemon temon	I somehow could hoe the fields
	Pata tula	Oh! The Plucking work

³¹² Y. Chattopadhyaya., *Cha-kulir atmakahini. The Experiences of a Coolie in a Tea garden in Assam. A tale founded on fact* (Calcutta, 1901); R. Bidyaratna, *Kuli Kahini (Sketches from Cooly Life)* (Calcutta, 1888).

³¹³ The *Jhumur* songs represented here are compiled from varied sources. This is particularly drawn from, S. Sengputa & J.L. Sharma, *Jhumur: Folksongs and Dances of Tea Garden Labourers of Assam*, P.P. Mahato, *World View of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand* in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp.131-142, pp.214-226; P.P. Mahato & K.C. Mahato, *The Collective Wisdom and Excellences related to world views on Forest, Biodiversity and Nature-Man-Spirit complex of the indigeneous people of Eastern India* in C.K. Paty (ed) *Forest, Government and Tribe* (Delhi, 2007) pp.36-47. Some of these songs were collected by Kali Dasgupta (1926-2005)—a singer and folk song collector, which was later released in an audio volume. *Folk Songs of North-East India* (Calcutta, 2003).

	kam go	Oh! Jaduram
	Hai	You deceived me to
	Jaduram	Assam
	Phanki	
	diye pathali Assam	

3	Paka	Putting my name
	khata lekhaeli naam	down in the
	Re	(Contract)
	Lampatiya Shyam	Oh nasty Shyam
	Phanki	You deceived me to
	diey bandu chalali	Assam
	Assam	Depots were
	Depughare maritari	marked by
	Uttaiele	commotion
	terene kari	Had to swim to
	Hoogly	come to the shore
	sahare dekholi	In Hoogly
	Akash	(Calcutta) could I
	Mane kari Assam	finally see the sky
	jab	When I wished to
	Jora	go to Assam
	Pankha tanab	I thought I had pull
	Sahab	the fan
	dil Kodaleri Kam	But Sahab gave me
	Dina	hoeing job
	Udaya bhane	So says poor Udaya
	Akale	(poet)
	peter tane	For the sake of the
	Tipki	stomach
	Tipki parhe gham	I sweat in this heat

4	Sardar bole kam kam	Sardar says work work
	Babu bole dhorī an	Babu says nab the fool
	Sahab bole libo pither chan	Sahab threatens to peel the skin of my back
	Re Jaduram	Oh Jaduram
	Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam	You deceived us to Assam

The songs, in a sense, map the transition of the Assam tea garden from being imagined as sites of hope to becoming the sites of despair and difficulties. During the course of the late nineteenth century, tea gardens had also become a major avenue and opportunity for work and survival for societies during periods of acute scarcity and conditions of deprivation. Large scale migration to tea-gardens during the famine years attests to that process.³¹⁴

Song 1 captures this optimism regarding Assam—as a land of hope, opportunity and work. The positive mood is again recreated in the opening lines of Song 2, where the narrator contrasts the greenery of Assam cha-bagaan to the miseries (dukh) at home (desh). These hopes are shattered when the “reality” of life on the tea garden is found to be harsh and oppressive. A painful scene is recreated in Song 3—which narrates in graphic details the tortuous journey of a fresh recruit from home through depots, steamers, Calcutta and arrival on tea garden. Again the individual’s experience of life

³¹⁴ A tour of a famine affected Bilaspur in the late 1890, an observer found that a standard answer to the whereabouts of the husbands of many destitute women was, “...he has gone to Assam to the gardens.” On further enquiries he learnt that the civil doctor of the station was passing around sixteen hundred people per week (for Assam). F.H.S Merewether, *A tour through the famine district of India* (London, 1898) pp.130-131; Resolution on Surgeon-Major Campbell’s Report on the Arrangements for Transit of Emigrants to Assam. Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration A, June 1897. NAI.

and work is at variance to what s/he was made to believe. Song 4 harps on the agony of the coolie—who is entrapped in the regimented disciplinary regime of the tea garden.

Life on the tea garden, as depicted in these songs, hints at the *dukh* and *taklif* of the coolie. This was often the realisation of the nature of the work being different from what was anticipated. In song 3, the person was under the impression that he will have to pull fans (*Pankha tanab*), which was relatively easier than the hoeing work (*Kodaleri kam*) that he was assigned by the manager (*Sahab*) in Assam.³¹⁵ The perception of relative “easiness” of plantation work was often associated with the plucking of the tea leaves (*Pata tulna*), the primary occupation of women workers on the plantations, as expressed by the narrator of the Song 1: ‘*Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane*’ (We will pluck the leaves on the gardens with joy). This alludes to a persistent notion of plucking being “effortless” and “natural” to women as they biologically possessed the ideal nimble fingers essential for it. This essentialisation and feminisation of plucking work devalued the female labour and legitimised the hierarchical/patriarchal authority and wage structure. Contemporary visual representations of tea plucking show the dominance of such perceptions in the colonial capitalist imaginations.



³¹⁵ For such “task anxieties” in the plantations of 1860s, see chapter 2.

Fig 3.1 Photograph of a tea plucker. ³¹⁶

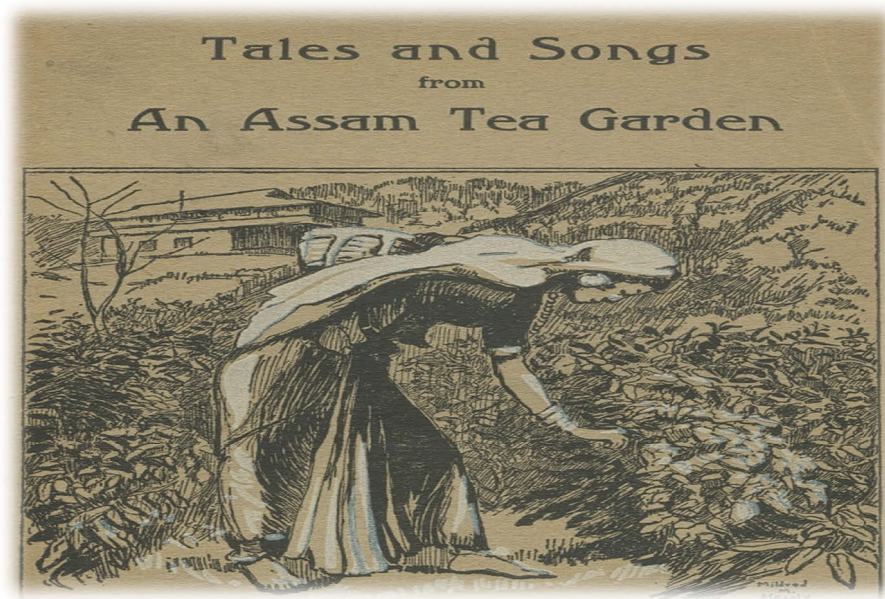


Fig 3.2 Visuals of women tea pluckers. ³¹⁷

These images unabashedly celebrate the “joy” of plucking tea leaves by creating an illusion of it being as simple/pleasurable as picking flowers from a garden and therefore ideal for the women. Apart from the romanticisation/feminisation of work, the sexualisation of female labour, by constituting the work in terms of a gendered social identity, indicates to the marginalisation of the female labourer’s position in the plantation work/life hierarchy.³¹⁸ Such images were particularly influential in conditioning the perceptions about life and work on the Indian plantations of the metropolitan audience and have become the recurrent themes in tea advertisements.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ The photograph was taken by the “professional” studio Bourne and Shepherd titled ‘Assamese Woman in costume, Picking Tea leaves in a field’ was taken at the end of the nineteenth century. DOE Asia: Assam: General: NM 40922 04423800, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928).

³¹⁷ The image of the left is a cover illustration from a book published by a tea manager and the image on the right is a graphic of a tea advertisement. M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928).

³¹⁸ For a detailed discussion and criticism see P. Chatterjee, *Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) pp.112-113.

³¹⁹ A. Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester, 2003) esp. the section ‘The Orient as female and the representation of the Tamil woman tea picker’ pp.119-125.

In contrast to this romantic perception/construction of plucking and woman's work, the nature of the work becomes evident in practice (Song 2). This everyday grind of work in the heat and sweat (Tipiki Tipki parhe gham) had to be endured because of the necessity to make a living (Song 3). This intensity of work (kam kam) was driven by threats and systematic physical disciplining by the authorities—Manager-Native Assistant-Overseer (Sahab-Babu-Sardar) in the plantations (Song 4).³²⁰

3.5 Deception of Recruiters and the Fear of Assam

The dukh and taklif on the tea gardens, evocatively pictured in these songs, premised on a narrative strategy where the path to the sites of 'oppression' was induced at some stage due to the deception (Phanki) of the recruiter (Shyam/Jaduram), who lured them to contract (Paka khata) and facilitated their passage to Assam in the first place. In anecdotes, stories and experiences about Assam tea garden recruitment, deception (Phanki) and the act of luring (Phuslao) figures, prominently, to characterize the practices of the recruiter.³²¹

The strict distinction in the colonial and planter discourses regarding the practices of the recruiters, i.e. the professional (Arkatti) indulging in corrupt practices and the non-professional (Sardar) working through familial and kin networks, is not sustained in these narratives. Though the arkatti had earned a "historical" reputation of fear and hatred built on indiscriminate phankis and phuslaoing compounded with physical threat, kidnapping and other abuses; the sardar hardly aroused any real confidence and there was a persistent feeling that he always spoke with a "purpose".³²² The exaggerations of the sardar, as narrated by many returnees, could have only reinforced that perception. In

³²⁰ For a detailed discussion of the work practices and authority structure during field operation, See Chapter 5.

³²¹ The practices of deception was associated with recruiters for other destinations. The Surinam *arkattis* allegedly pronounced it as *Sri Ram* (Lord Ram) or *srinam* ('sublime name') thus suggesting that the trip was in honour of the almighty. R. Hoeft, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville, 1998) p.36; C.E.S. Choenni, 'From Bharat to Sri Ram Desh: The Emigration of Indian Indentured Labourers to Surinam' in R. Rai & P. Reeves (ed.), *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational networks and changing identities* (2009) p.112.

³²² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.54.

effect, fixing the identity of Shyam and Jaduram in these narratives of being an arkatti or a sardar, with absolute certainty, could be a futile exercise.

Apart from the deceptions and exaggerations of the recruiter, the lurking threats of being kidnapped by them were eliciting extreme “pre-emptive” responses. There were stories from the district of Sambalpur (Orissa) of families sleeping roped together to prevent the recruiters from “carrying them off.”³²³ Also unwilling/kidnapped recruits were reported to have jumped off running trains to liberate themselves from the shackles of the recruiter/abductor.³²⁴ Such “extraordinary” responses starkly underlined a deep sense of desperation in face of the rampant abusive recruitment practices, and further, accentuated the aversion for Assam recruitment and the “oppressive” cha-bagaan. This fear of Assam recruiter, remarked a magistrate of Hazaribagh district (Chotanagpur), was so acute that people became apprehensive of even visiting their haats and bazaars. He compared the paranoia to the ‘days of thuggee’, when there was such ‘widespread fear of travelling’.³²⁵ The late nineteenth century India was gripped with this lurking concern to the threat/idea of being taken to the tea-garden. The already cited instances of workers from Duars tea gardens, the upcountry labourers working on railway extensions in Assam and the Gandas lodged in the Sambalpur prison, articulating their deep reservations of going to the tea-gardens, becomes intelligible in this light. Three other cases can be cited in this regard.

First, a “widespread” fear raged in the tribal districts of Bengal in the 1880s during the enumerative drives of the colonial census. The numbering of people, according to some rumours in circulation, was merely a “preparatory stage” for the wholesale deportation of women to work as tea pluckers on the

³²³ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.89, p.61.

³²⁴ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.61.

³²⁵ R. Behal and P.P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations, 1840-1908’ in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, Special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3&4 (1992) p.155.

Assam tea gardens.³²⁶ The perceived threat of being taken to Assam in large numbers, and the complicity of the colonial state in that process, was also informed by the gendered nature of that demand. In very particular ways, the rumour grasped the grammar of Assam recruitment during the period, where the colonial state was “organising” and “encouraging” large scale emigration, and the tea planters were stepping up the demands for workers, in general, and women workers, in particular, to rectify the “sexual imbalance” of the work force.³²⁷

Again, in the late 1890s, a district commissioner of Chotanagpur (Chaibassa) was unsuccessful of getting hold of anyone to draw his *pankha* (fan) during a stopover at a local railway station. An individual offering his services after much persuasion refused to wait for payment. On being asked to explain his strange actions, he said that ‘the sarkar would chalan him to Assam’.³²⁸

The invocation of “Assam bogey” sometimes became part of a larger political strategy to “mobilise” popular support, as evident during the Swadeshi activity in the early twentieth century. Addressing a peasant gathering in rural Bengal, some local politicians hinted at the ulterior motive of the British government of introducing “Assam laws” to take over their lands and transport a large number

³²⁶ The men were believed to be sent to Afghanistan as camp-followers for the British army. There were several census induced rumours fears expressed in North Bihar during Census operations of men being taken to foreign country, often Afghanistan. *New York Times*, June 1st, 1890; A. Yang, ‘A Conservation of Rumours: The Language of Popular “Mentalities” in Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial India’ *Journal of Social History* 20, no.3 (Spring 1987) pp.485-505.

³²⁷ The threat of the single woman being decoyed to the Assam *cha-bagaan* became a powerful social anxiety provoking various responses in the late nineteenth century. See, S. Sen, ‘Questions of consent: Women’s recruitment for Assam tea gardens, 1859-1900’ *Studies in History* 18, no.2 (2002) pp.231-260; S. Sen, ‘Without his consent?’: Marriage and Women’s Migration in Colonial India’ *International Labor and Working-Class History* 65 (Spring 2004) pp.77-104; S. Sen, ‘Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal’ *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996) pp.135-156.

³²⁸ A local missionary noted ‘...a fear (very strong in this district) that they will be transported sooner or later to the tea gardens of Assam. The popular ignorance is very great and no arguments can overcome it.’ Hoffman Note, Emigration Dept., Financial Branch nos 62-128, April 1899, WBSA cited in I.S. Das Gupta, ‘Agrarian Expansion under Colonial Rule and its impact on a Tribal Economy’ in E. Basile and I. Mukhopadhyaya (ed.) *The Changing Identity of Rural India* (Delhi, 2009). *Appendix to the report of the Indian Famine Commission, Vol IV. Central Provinces and Berar* (London, 1898) p.90.

of them to tea-gardens to serve as coolies.³²⁹ Raising the latent concerns of a population extremely wary of being “recruited” for Assam, a choice offered to them was clear: of either waiting to become the coolies of the colonial plantation or participating in the struggle for becoming the citizens of an emerging nation.³³⁰

The idea and practice of recruitment for tea gardens was registering in other complicated ways in the migrating societies. “Selling” came to be synonymously used for Assam recruitment in some regions. A recruiter in Chotanagpur mentioned this in the context of female migrants being hired for tea gardens:

Suppose that a young woman wishes to go to Assam and I produce her father and prove by two witnesses that he is her father and he gives his consent to emigrating, when he goes back to his village he will be reproached by everyone with having “sold” his daughter.³³¹

Many others mentioned this “loss of respectability” and the disapproval by the community.³³² In some regions, it was seen as a prelude to bondage.³³³ In Mundari language, the word *Chalan* came to simultaneously signify the act of being taken to a depot (to be recruited for Assam) and being imprisoned.³³⁴

³²⁹ In a memorial from some residents of the district of Mymensingh addressed to the Governor of Bengal protesting the proposal to transfer the district to the Administration of Assam they mentioned the existence of “wild rumours” that ‘...ordinary *raiya*s will be taken away from their fields and made to work as coolies on the tea gardens of Assam; that they will lose the Bengal Tenancy Act or that the local road cesses of Bengal will be filched away and devoted to making roads in the jungly parts of Assam’. S. Bandyopadhyaya, *Caste, Protest and identity in Colonial India* (Richmond, 1997) p.68. *Further Papers relating to the Reconstitution of the Provinces of Bengal and Assam* (London, 1905) p. 109

³³⁰ Such a rhetoric becomes even more articulate in the case of Assam plantations in the 1920s. See Chapter 7.

³³¹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.44

³³² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 15, p.17, p.75, p.44.

³³³ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.70, p.18.

³³⁴ Anderson notes that colonial enquiries into labour recruitment in north India during the 1880s referred to batches of labourers as *chalan*, which mirrored the use of the word during the first half of the nineteenth century as a mode of reference to chain gangs of transfer prisoners and transportation convicts. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.21; C.Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009).

There was an unmistakable connection made between contract and condition of being bound (in Assam) in the Chotanagpur region, which was one of the “oldest” migrating region for the Assam cha-bagaan. The refusal of the Chotanagpuri labourers of Duars tea garden was on the grounds that it was a place of agreement/contract (Agreement ka jagah). In the district of Ranchi (Chotanagpur), the local police encountered a “popular” reluctance in hiring constables because the obligatory three year contract made the people “suspicious”—as it was strikingly reminiscent of the Assam contract.³³⁵

3.6 The ‘Choice’ of Assam

The notions about migration and work on Assam *cha-bagaan* were not always conditioned in “isolation”, but also framed through the changing and emerging possibilities for employment and earning available near “home” and at a “distance”.³³⁶ Chotanagpur, the primary recruiting ground for Assam tea-gardens, witnessed a particular trend of some migrant streams moving towards the tea plantations of Duars (Bengal) during the last decades of the nineteenth century.³³⁷ The Duars Report claimed that tea gardens of the district ‘...hold a monopoly of the best class of labour from Chota Nagpur and Sonthal Parganas, having beaten Assam out of the market for that class’.³³⁸ This shift could be attributed to the nature of the labour demand in Duars, where people could leave after harvest to return back in the rainy season after earning some money.³³⁹ The “seasonal” nature of migration allowed some individuals to participate in the agricultural process and accommodate wage-work on the tea-

³³⁵ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 12, p.20.

³³⁶ R. Dasgupta, ‘Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply’ in *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994).

³³⁷ In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, around 46% of the recruits came from the Chotanagpur. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.235.

³³⁸ *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p.26

³³⁹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.14

plantations in the non-agricultural season.³⁴⁰ Such “other” opportunities of work in tea-gardens created a comparative impression of the two work-sites. A local labour agent from the Chotanagpur mentioned that when ‘you mention “Assam” to a villager it conveys the idea of hardship (*dukh*)...the Duars have no such name’.³⁴¹ A “favourable” idea about Duars was noted by a missionary who said that a strong opinion was that in Duars one stays ‘as long as they like’, and further, ‘one can go to another garden if they wish to’.³⁴² Such a comparative view was also narrated by another missionary who said that Assam was not as healthy as Duars and that they are ‘better treated on the Duars garden’.³⁴³ A tea manager having experience of working in Assam and Duars tea plantations mentioned that ‘...coolies come to Duars because they have no fear that they may be placed on contract’.³⁴⁴

The choice for Duars plantations, as being apparently expressed by the people of the region, cannot be simply read through the dichotomy of Freedom (Duars)/ Unfreedom (Assam), as the plantation labour regime of Duars was also characterised by various excesses, coercion and strategies of immobilisation. Such dichotomies simplify the fluidity and complexities in which such migrating decisions were made. The difficulties induced by the Assam labour regime of contract(s) and the abusive practices of recruitment to sustain it, more seriously, threatened the conduct of individual and social life, and generated a comparatively “favourable” notion about the Duars plantations. *Dukh* of Assam was greater than the *dukh* of Duars. Such choices did not exclude different work situations within the province of Assam. A labour agent in Calcutta summed up this sentiment:

³⁴⁰ Emigration to Assam were of a more permanent nature, but from the Duars about 10,000 people returned every year, bringing back a saving of approximately 1 lakh rupees. Dufferin Report, no.351R, Ranchi, 31 May 1888.

³⁴¹ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.30.

³⁴² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.13.

³⁴³ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.14.

³⁴⁴ *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p.63.

In a few cases I have offered *coolies* a choice between the Assam railway and Trading Company's one-year contract for its coal mines (in Assam) with Rs. 7 wage and a four year contract on Rs. 5 on a tea garden. The *coolies* invariably chose the former, and I understood that the choice was determined as much by the shorter term as by the higher wage.³⁴⁵

3.7 Conclusions

The “popular” constructions of the *cha-bagaan* was premised on an “awareness” of the plantation system in the recruiting regions, stemming from personal/familiar experiences and the wider circulation of information—through rumours, stories and anecdotes about Assam. This, again, alludes to the ways the *cha-bagaan* was being comprehended and “negotiated” in the recruiting regions, where the strategies and practices mobilised in the production of *coolies* (for the tea-gardens) came to be perceived as disruptive, excessive and unreasonable; engendering various anxieties. Such negotiations did not necessarily imply that the exploitative practices and abuses, integral to the “free” labour system, were collectively “resisted” and eliminated or “voluntary” migration to Assam tea-garden completely ceased over time. It rather undermines the notion of ignorance and gullibility of the social groups migrating to Assam, emphasising on how the “knowledge” of tea garden—recruitment practices, conditions of life and nature of work in plantation, were being registered and articulated in the context of their lived realities.

³⁴⁵ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.89.

4. Changing Work Organisation of Plantations, ‘Drink Problem’ and Working Culture

4.1 Introduction

The notions of unpopularity of Assam was not just premised on the excesses in recruitment, but articulated as a deepening concern about the nature of plantation work and the ways in which it was intensified. Such processes were apparently facilitated by a growing number of *coolies* made available by “relaxation” in recruitment and further alterations in the nature of contracts.

In this backdrop, consider a “curious” letter published in the May 31st, 1880 edition of the daily Englishman termed as ‘The Planter’s Grievance’. In this piece, the writer (planter) voiced grave concerns regarding the “grog shops” sprouting up near the proverbial ‘gates of every tea garden of Assam’, resulting in the ‘introduction of drunkenness, crime and disease in factories, collecting bad characters in the neighbourhood of tea-gardens, attracting *coolies* away from their work, increasing sickness and a general difficulty in the management of labour’. The text of letter goes:

...grave and serious evils resulting from some measures lately taken here by the local govt. for the encouragement of drunkenness, by the forced establishment of shops for the sale of native spirits in the immediate vicinity of all important tea gardens. I suppose our mission in no heathen country is complete till we have taught the benighted native the delights of drunkenness; but I think the sacred imported labourer might have been spared the enlightenment. Since the commencement of the tea industry, the bodily welfare of the imported labourer has been the chief delight of the Bengal Government ...for years the blameless *coolie* has led a sober, peaceful and industrious existence, drinking harmless fermented liquor manufactured by himself, only getting drunk on proper occasions, and beating his wife in a reasonable and moderate degree...In an evil moment it occurred to the Chief Commissioner that more money might be raised by the sale of spirit licenses.³⁴⁶

Such serious concerns about the consequences of “coolie drinking” did not square up with an assertion made by another tea planter named George Barker. In his long experience of managing a tea garden, Barker notes ‘(that) at times of a heavy flush, or backward state of cultivation, when something must be

³⁴⁶ Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7-8, Part B.

done to increase the labour power of the garden, brandy or rum—the more the better—is the only inducement’.³⁴⁷ Barker’s assertion was reiterated by a colonial excise official writing in the 1880s. He remarked that it had become a custom (*dustoor*) with *coolies* to get rum as *bakshish* for extra work, and also for good and satisfactory work.³⁴⁸ This seems to go in the direction of a “strategy” proposed in the 1850s by Assam tea planters: of inducing the reluctant “opium smoking Assamese” for plantation work through a control over opium purchase.³⁴⁹ Here, rather being a detriment, the stimulant and even the addictive attributes of alcohol/drugs are mobilised to encourage social groups to participate in the work process of plantations. That alcohol/drugs were perceived as stimulating or, even, inducement to work (especially under trying adverse circumstances) was not a colonial or even capitalist invention, and references to this can be found in a range of settings across time and space.³⁵⁰

Taking this contradiction as an entry point, this chapter will contend that the conflicting positions on *coolie* drinking was rooted in the shift from the “unsettled” plantations of 1860s—disciplined (by planters) through violence and coercion—to more “systematised” plantations taking roots from the late 1860s and early 1870s. This further reveals how new forms of organisation of life and work of the plantations were generating new concerns for the control on the work process and workers.

³⁴⁷ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp.174-75.

³⁴⁸ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1884-85.

³⁴⁹ See Chapter 1.

³⁵⁰ Jankowiak and Bradburd argue that historically, stimulants have been used to enhance physical and mental performance by increasing endurance, concentration, and the intensity of physical and mental work. That labour-enhancing drugs (including alcohol) were employed well before the advent of merchantilism or market capitalism and are by no means a European contribution to world culture. Even the upcountry *coolies* (from North-west Provinces and Bihar) working in the tea gardens of Assam, claimed that they could not keep their health in these eastern districts without *Ganja*. The drug they argued improved digestion, the use of it kept off coughs and colds, and for those who had to work outside in the rains it is invaluable, as it prevented rain and exposure from affecting the body. See ‘Drugs, Desire, and European Economic Expansion’, by Daniel Bradburd and William Jankowiak in Bradburd and Jankowiak (ed) *Drugs, Labour and Colonial Expansion* (Tucson, 2003) and *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1882-83.

4.2 Colonial Policy and Taxing the “Coolie Drink”

The genesis of the debate has to be situated in the changing colonial excise policy of the province. Assam, till the year 1874, when it was made a separate province, formed a part of the province of Bengal and the Excise revenue was raised on the principles applicable to Bengal. Until the year 1868-69, the excise revenue amounted to just over 8,000 rupees yearly. After 1868-69, revenues increased with surprising rapidity. Collections in 1869-70 were half in excess of of the previous year, while in 1873-74 the collections were double of the 1870-71 figures.³⁵¹

This “spectacular” growth mirrored the rise of the tea industry in the wake of the 1868 crisis —showing a pattern of steady growth of working population on more “settled” plantations. But these figures of excise growth did not impress the colonial administration and they consistently maintained that they were “meagre” considering the large and growing drinking/working population in the province. The relatively high consumption of the home-brewed rice beer—*Pachwai*, by the plantation *coolies* was the major object of their concern. Their policy, throughout the late nineteenth century, was geared to “check” the consumption of this “illicit” liquor (home brewed rice beer) and offer opportunities for the *coolies* to buy the “licit” liquor (country liquor from the licensed shops) instead.

The inauguration of the outstill system in Assam in the late 1870s grew out of such concerns. Under the terms of this system, the manufacture and sale of country spirits was auctioned out to the highest bidder, for individual liquor shops. The initiation of such an excise policy anticipated a change in the *coolie’s* drink of preference, from beer to country spirits, or more specifically, from untaxed alcohol to taxed alcohol. These figures of growth became a major source of criticism, and planters took this as an evidence of facilitating and promoting the “disease” of drunkenness among the *coolie* population—they being the primary consumers of country liquor in the province.

4.3 Drink as Work Stimulant

³⁵¹ *Report on the Excise Administration of British India* (Simla, 1882) p.22

The association of drink and hard manual work in trying circumstances, a prevalent idea in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was not lost upon the Assam tea managers of the 1870s. In fact, the planters of Assam were one major importers of Rum into the province for their *coolies*.³⁵² There was a general belief that Rum was essential for the health and stimulation of the *coolies* in the 'unhealthy and feverish' province of Assam. In the words of a doctor of a tea garden: 'little stimulating drink after a week's hard toil is beneficial to the health of *coolies* in damp, moist and malarial climate in Assam'.³⁵³ The findings of the enquiry into the excise administration in the tea districts of Assam and Bengal in 1889 made an observation extremely instructive in this regard:

...it is remarkable fact that 31 out of 35 planters admit that they distribute rum to *coolie*'s after a hard days' work or a long journey. Even many of those who are strongly opposed to their *coolies* getting any liquor supply them with rum, saying it is good for them, makes them work better and more cheerfully, gives them heart during epidemics of cholera and sickness, such as fever. It is curious that the enquiries made by the Excise Commission in 1884 showed that there was a widespread belief that rum and spirits made by European process of manufacture did not generally agree with the people of this country. Be this as it may, it is odd to find planters who virtually oppose the consumption by their *coolies* of outstill liquor, yet freely giving as a substitute on occasions strong and raw spirit like rum.³⁵⁴

Alcohol and specifically rum started appearing and acquiring a new function in the plantation life and work process. It has been argued that linking sanctioned access of alcohol to labour (like giving alcohol at the end of communal labour and at particular significant moments) was a powerful incentive to participate

³⁵² Upto the year 1878-79, all rum consumed in the Province was obtained from Calcutta, where duty was realised and credited to the Bengal government. In 1878, however, a distillery was opened at Dibrugarh with a monopoly of manufacture within the Lakhimpur District for a period of five years. R Logan, *Report on the Excise Administration of British India* (Simla, 1882) p.24

³⁵³ There was also a widespread practice of giving 'rum-rations' to the British army in the 18th century, for it was widely believed and confirmed by the current medical opinion that liquor protected the body against heat and cold alike and it was essential in situations that prompted fatigue or were thought to be unhealthy. Especially in America, considered to be a rough and tough terrain, the British soldiers were regularly provisioned with rum. Generally, the ration was about a gill of rum per day- about a gallon per month. An army officer stationed in America in the 1780s writes, '...This is a bad country, this America, where you always have to drink, either to get warm, or to get cool.' Paul E. Kopperman, "The Cheapest Pay": Alcohol Abuse in the Eighteenth Century British Army, *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 3 (July 1996) pp.446-448.

³⁵⁴ Report to her Majesty's Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, nos. 993-1020.

in the work process.³⁵⁵ However, this act of giving out rum by planters to the workers was not just a simple case of “monopolisation and manipulation of addiction” or creation of “liquor-debts” but, also, hinted at their participation in the circulation of a ‘cultural artefact’³⁵⁶ with great symbolic and ritualistic value. Such gesture, as we will argue later, alludes to the shifting authority of managers, which could no longer be premised exclusively on violent strategies of work and control.³⁵⁷

The dispensation of alcohol by planters points to the emerging transactions and new moments in the organisation of work and life on tea gardens. Planters gave alcohol as “reward” (*bakhshish*) for extra labour or a job well done. Renewals of contracts by workers were confirmed by a mark of thumb and a bottle of rum. The religious occasions on the tea gardens (Karam Puja and Holi) did not just mean some leave from work but also a supply of rum.³⁵⁸ Such transactions of a “culturally valued” object appeared at moments in the rhythms of work (extra work, good work, end of work or renewal of contracts) and also at moments in the rhythms of life and culture being produced and reproduced on plantations (festival, marriage, birth etc.). These rhythms hinted

³⁵⁵ Michael Angrosino argues that such process of “monopolisation” and “manipulation” of addiction is evident in the case of Caribbean planters, who compelled their Indian indentured workers to consume rum rather than marijuana, as their drug of choice, enhancing the economic return on their labourers as well as the intensity of their labour. ‘Rum and Ganja: Indenture, Drug Foods, Labor Motivation, and the Evolution of the Modern Sugar Industry in Trinidad’, by M. V. Angrosino in Bradburd and Jankoviak (ed) *Drugs, Labour and Colonial Expansion* (University of Arizona Press, 2003).

³⁵⁶ This usage is derived from Mandelbaum’s seminal work on the relationship between alcohol and culture. He argues that alcohol is a cultural artifact because the forms and meanings of alcoholic beverages are culturally defined and consequently has cultural implications. Where alcohol is known, patterns for its use are prescribed usually in fine detail. Alcohol may be tabooed, it is not ignored. Traditionally, it has been most widespread ‘intoxicant’ in use, the most widely valued as a ritual and societal artefact. In some languages, as in English and also in Hindi, ‘drink’ and ‘*peena*’ takes on the connotation of drinking alcoholic liquids. D. G. Mandelbaum, Alcohol and Culture, *Current Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (June 1965).

³⁵⁷ See Chapter 5.

³⁵⁸ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1881-82, 1882-83 and 1884-85; Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.177.

at patterns and routines of work and life culture taking some “form” on Assam plantations.³⁵⁹

4.4 Industrial Tea, Intensification of Work and the Intoxicant Drink

From around the late 1870s and early 1880s, the growing relevance of Assam/Indian tea in the British market found resonance in several articles and books published in Britain and India.

³⁵⁹ These special circumstances of discharge of rum to *coolies* also baffled the provincial administration. In the late 1870s, there was a lot of debate in the official circles about the nature of this rum supply to *coolies* by the planters, which was said to be a loss to the excise revenue of the province. For the planters got this rum tax-free, under section 49 of Act XXI of 1856, which exempted persons importing spirits for private use and not for sale. However it was felt that the circumstances of issue constituted a sale because it was issued for a consideration, which the planter received in the shape, either of more work, or in lieu of the additional wages it would otherwise be necessary to give. In the words of a District Commissioner in Assam valley, ‘...they (planters) do sell rum. They, of course, do not get cash for it. They give it in place of wages where they give it at all.’ However, in 1877 an application asking permission to make planters take out license for selling rum was rejected by the financial department. Rum supplied to coolies in Assam not subject to license duties. Separate Revenue, August 1877, Nos 27-28; Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7-8, Part B and *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1883-84.



Fig 4.1: Comparative Consumption of Indian and Chinese Tea, 1867 and 1907.³⁶⁰

In a book celebrating such a development, a colonial official firmly asserted that ‘no comparison can be drawn between tea manufacture as followed out in China and India (in this year 1881)’. He went on to elaborate his point:

We (British) have done a great deal since the indigenous plant was discovered in the jungles of Assam, now nearly fifty years ago.. The Chinaman grows tea and makes tea as he taught us to do it twenty or thirty years ago. The pupil in this case has certainly beaten his master..but where we have left our teacher far behind is in manufacture. All is hand labour; machinery to them is unknown. The most primitive ideas in tea manufacture are still adhered to.. The former is as crude as it was two or five hundred years ago; the latter (though still far from perfection) in its many details, in its

³⁶⁰ J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts About Indian Tea* (London, 1910).

numerous machines cleverly contrived to save labour and better the teas, is a striking illustration of the activity, the energy, the inventive genius of the Anglo-Saxon race.³⁶¹

Apart from marking a shift in the discourse from civilised skilled Chinese art of tea making to the primitive handmade Chinese tea; the use of machinery in tea manufacture was now gaining greater currency. This process of mechanisation continued with great fervour till the end of the nineteenth century and until the beginning of twentieth century.³⁶² This was also the period of unprecedented growth (both in terms of acreage and production), and by the turn of century Assam overtook China as the leading tea producing and exporting region in the world. A parallel trend to this was the rising productivity of the Assam tea plantations.

Period	Productivity (Pounds/acre)
1885-1889	316
1890-1894	358
1895-1899	361
1900-1904	416
1905-1909	477
1910-1914	531

Table 4.1:
Productivity
(Pound/Acre)
1885-
1914.³⁶³

³⁶¹ I. L Hauser, *Tea: Its Origin, Cultivation, Manufacture and Use* (Chicago, 1890) p.11

³⁶² This becomes evident from the scientific publications on tea compiled in this period. See, *The Tea Cyclopedia* (Calcutta, 1881); *The Tea Planter's Vade Mecum: A volume of important articles and information of permanent interest and value regarding tea, tea blight, tea cultivation and manufacture, tea machinery* (Calcutta, 1885); E. Money, *The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea* (London, 1883). Money's book had four editions published in 1870, 1874, 1878 and 1883. Only in the fourth edition the book had a separate section on tea machinery.

³⁶³ H. Mann, 'The Indian Tea Industry in its Scientific Aspects', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol 79 No. 4089 (Apr 1931) p.475

The rising scale of production and, especially, the substantial enhancement in “productivity levels” were not logical outcomes of greater use of machinery in manufacture or better methods of cultivation. The technological innovations and mechanisation, which transformed the nature and capability of tea manufacturing, did not comprehensively affect the cultivation methods.³⁶⁴ The field work and plucking of leaves were carried out manually and even required a greater human input to keep pace with the mechanising and quickening production process.³⁶⁵ A missionary stationed in a tea district described a ‘machine like organization’ in the tea fields, which worked under extremely high pressure to supply leaves to the factory. Such an organization of work and increased demands work outputs was attempted to be achieved through a greater and closer supervision of work and life in a plantation context. Specialization and intensification of work became an integral part of this routinizing plantation regime. A planter’s account of the routines of work hinted at the ‘tyranny of the clock’ which seemed to have conditioned the life and work-discipline on the plantations:

At six in the morning, and sometimes half an hour earlier, the gongs are beaten in different *coolie* lines...Steam whistle attached to the boiler shrieks out the unwelcome news that another day’s labour is to commence at once; and every one turns out to work—the women to pluck and the men to hoe and the skilled workmen and children to the factory...at noon the gongs and whistle are again sounded when the women take the leaf they have plucked to the factory.³⁶⁶

In the same vein, a recent author calls this period as the beginning of “industrial tea”—where the ‘tea workers were assembled in lines and subjected to absolutely rigid time-discipline’.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ J. Weatherstone, *The Pioneers, 1825-1900: The early British tea and coffee Planters and their way of life* (London, 1986).

³⁶⁵ E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of tea* (London, 1883) pp.222-271; C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.14.

³⁶⁶ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.60.

³⁶⁷ A. Macfarlane & I. Macfarlane, *The Empire of Tea; The remarkable history of the plant that took over the world* (London, 2004) pp. 192-194.

In this context of formalisation and attempts for a strict enforcement of time work discipline, the looming threat of liquor shops at the ‘gates of every tea garden’, where workers could theoretically buy alcohol whenever they wanted, became a new concern for planters. The stimulant in this shifting plantation context held the potential to become an intoxicant.³⁶⁸

Such planter’s anxieties were manifesting at different levels. Apart from the ‘Planter’s letter’ published in an English daily in the early 1880s, virtually opening the Pandora’s box, there were major criticisms and joint memorandum from the planters and the tea companies in the late 1880s and even a debate in the British House of Commons about the system of Excise in India in which the ‘drink question’ in Assam figured prominently. This was followed by a detailed enquiry into the systems of excise in the tea districts of Assam and Bengal. These planter’s concerns, was epitomised and, in certain senses, reached its apogee with the pamphlet published in 1903 entitled ‘Liquor Shops and the Outstill System in Assam’. In this pamphlet, also submitted as a memorandum to the government, the author, J. Buckingham—the person chairing the Assam Branch of the tea association, made a scathing criticism of the system of excise in Assam.³⁶⁹ Tea managers, doctors and missionaries were interviewed and the point emphatically made that the question of drink and the threat of drunkenness was detriment to the health of *coolies*/tea garden.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ In the context of Western Europe and United States, scholars have argued that the ‘drink question’ and growing wave of temperance becomes relevant in the socio-economic context of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century with the rapid pace of industrialisation and the growth of middle class as a social force. At one level there was “revolution” in the production of the distilled spirits further aggravated in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century with the ability of a modern industrialized chemical industry to isolate, mass produce and deliver large quantities of alcohol. At the same time the ‘...Champions of the larger processes of social change (the middle classes) with a material and moral stake in sobriety called traditional habits of consumption into question as they undertook the enormous task of remaking popular traditions to suit their own values and interests.’ The stigmatization of beverage alcohol was set into motion, with coffee and tea increasingly seen as the more preferred socially accepted choices. See the Introduction: Temperance History in Comparative Perspective in James S. Roberts *Drink, Temperance and the Working Class in 19th century Germany* (Boston, 1984).

³⁶⁹ In order to gauge the medical opinion on this question Buckingham sent out a circular and got the response of around a dozen doctors, medical officers stationed in the tea districts of Assam and Surma Valley.

³⁷⁰ Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein.

The anxiety of loss of labour (rising case of absenteeism, poor performance, sickness from drink, drinking brawls and injured *coolies*) and consequent difficulties posed to the work-discipline was the underlying theme of the planter representations.³⁷¹ Summarising the nature of complaints made by the garden managers of Cachar, the District Commissioner writes:

The complaints from garden managers were numerous, and came from all directions. ...The nature of complaints is as follows:- (1) *Coolies* become unruly, (2) Assaults result, (3) Violent excesses on the part of the *coolies*, (4) much sickness, (5) temporary wildness verging on madness, (6) great drunkenness, (7) indebtedness as liquor is got on credit, (8) absconding when unable to pay these debts, (9) idleness and absence from work, (10) loss of labour owing to serious evil effects after drinking abominable stuff, (11) demoralisation of *coolies* who lie drunk outside the shops, (12) attempts to suicide when mad from drink, (13) constant rows on bazaar nights, (14) on pay days offensive.³⁷²

These concerns for the loss of individual worker integral to a more inter dependant work process was more clearly revealed in the report submitted by one Winchester, Medical officer of the Assam Company, stationed in Sibsaigar:

Case 1. Boglai, male, age 32, got drunk at Sonari, and fell into a drain on August 19th, 1901. From this accident he was unable to work until September 3rd, 1901.

2. One Etawari, male, age 40, got drunk at Sonari on august 19th, 1901, and in consequence was off work till 21st August 1901.

3. Tara, female, age 44, got drunk at Sonari on 18th August 1901 and was unfit for work for 6 days

4. Chailton, male, age 28, got drunk at Sonari on 1st Sep 1901, quarrelled with some other *coolies*, and in the affray had his metacarpal bone broken. He was off work nearly 3 weeks.

5. Rosona, female, was admitted into hospital on 8th Sep 1901, for injuries inflicted by her husband. She was ill ten days.

6. Haroo, male, age 28, got drunk at Sonari, and got into a quarrel. He received a large incised scalp wound for which he was detained in hospital ten days

Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, nos. 7-8, Part B, Correspondence regarding liquor traffic in Darjeeling and Questions in the House of Commons concerning the Liquor shops near tea gardens, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos. 204-218, Correspondence regarding the Liquor Traffic and alleged prevalence of drunkenness in Assam and the Tea districts of Bengal, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos 219-227, Report to her Majesty's Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, Nos 993-1020. J Buckingham, *Liquor shops and the excise administration in Assam, with medical reports and correspondance showing abuses of present outstill system* (Shillong, 1902)

³⁷¹ All the references to the 'loss of labour' in the planter and medical discourses are drawn from the Buckingham enquiry, unless otherwise mentioned.

³⁷² *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1883-84.

7. Bhoondia, female, age 27, was admitted to hospital on 29th Sep 1901, for an injury to knee joint inflicted by her husband while drunk. She was off work 14 days.
8. Dhanee, female, age 30, was admitted into Hospital on 6th December 1901, having been severely assaulted by her drunken husband. She was discharged on nineteenth October 1901.
9. Horua, male, age 30, was admitted to Hospital on 21st October 1901 having been assaulted when drunk...He was unfit for work until 28th October 1901.
10. Lohi, male, age 36, was admitted to Hospital 15th Dec 1901 suffering from a lacerated wound of the foot, received while drunk. He was discharged on 25th Dec 1901.
11. Gonga, female, age 18, off work 2 days from drunkenness
12. Giridhary, male, age 35, was admitted into Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, suffering from choleraic diarrhoea which followed a bout of drinking. He was discharged on 23rd December 1901.
13. One Bhondoo, male, age 48, was admitted into Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, with Pneumonia following upon exposure while drunk. He is still in hospital (24th Jan, 1902)
14. Mongtin, female, age 28, was admitted to Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, having been assaulted badly by her drunken husband. She was discharged cured on 22nd Dec 1901.

The mode of this reporting [Incident (drinking)—effect (state of drunkenness/accidents/quarrels)—consequence (individual absence from work)], and in some ways typical of this whole pamphlet. For it is not just about drinking and its effects perse, but the ways in which it interfered with the specialising work process, which becomes the object of concern and enquiry. This becomes more apparent in the later part of this report, when the doctor discusses the case of Sooklal, who died after a drunken brawl with three other *coolies*. This case says the doctor resulted for the garden not just the ‘...loss of Sooklal but also ...the loss of three other coolies who were sentenced to 4 years imprisonment for causing the death to Sooklal’.

In a similar tone, Swinley, the manager of Kalapani tea garden in Assam valley, reports his ‘drinking losses’ to the Buckingham enquiry:

On Sunday, 18th August, owing to excessive drinking at the grog shop at Charali (a distance of 6 miles from the gardens in this division) a brawl took place which resulted in two men being killed...Two Kalapani *coolies* were found guilty and sentenced under Sec 304 to 12 months imprisonment. All were old hands and most well behaved and never gave any trouble. *With the aid of a Government grog shop, however, I lose one cooly entirely, and the services of two for a whole year.*

At the same time, the degree of complaints regarding the time-work-discipline at the work-place got shriller. Planters started complaining about a rising

degree of *absenteeism*, especially on Mondays, Saturdays (being the day of weekly payment) and Sunday (the day of weekly *haats*, where the *coolies* purchased their drink). The findings of the excise enquiries into the tea districts of Assam and Bengal indicated to a ‘...five to ten percent of absence after hat days, and this absence is in a great measure (were)...due to the effects of drink’. Certain managers interviewed claimed this figure to be as high as 20 to 25 percent. Again the ‘St. Monday effect’³⁷³ was a recurrent grievance with the managers interviewed in the Buckingham enquiry. For instance Evans, the Manager of the Suntok garden reported that on Monday, January 13th 1902, half his factory was off work from the effects of alcohol. Godfrey, another manager of one Dole Bagaun tea garden complained:

This factory suffers very much by the liquor shop being only about 80 yards away from the *coolie* lines. Every Monday about 15 to 20 *coolies* are entirely off work being drunk, and about another 20 who go to work and cannot complete their full tasks, besides about 5 or 6 daily drunk and incapable: as for rows in the lines through drink there are several cases; some requiring medical treatment for two weeks.

Another phenomena was noted by a doctor (Sital Chundra Ghosh) of a garden in Assam Valley, where he claimed that ‘sick-list’ showed an alarming rise after the haat-days (Sundays), but infact starts going up after the ‘pay days’ (Saturdays). And on Monday mornings, ‘one in twenty comes to the hospital, pretending illness, after over drinking’. Wright, the manager of a tea garden in Lakhimpur pointed out to, ‘(that) there is more sickness (among the *coolie* population) after a hat day or a *coolie* festival’. This practice was confirmed by Dr. Price in the case of Nowgong tea gardens, ‘..(where) there are usually more application for sick leave after hat day than any other day during the week. The bulk of these cases are due to the consumption of alcohol’.

³⁷³ St. Monday, a practice of taking Monday off to recover from the weekend was almost universally observed among the English working people, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and probably survived into the second half of the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century, in several specific work situations. However, with the rise of capitalism with its changed notions of time and the concomitant rise for the work discipline, such practices were disciplined in a larger attempt to discipline labour and the production process. See, E.P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967) pp.72-76 and D. A. Reid, ‘The Decline of Saint Monday’, *Past & Present* 71 (May 1976)

It was not just the low muster on Mondays which concerned the managers, but also the *inefficiency* arising at the work-place, out of the after-effects of the drink. It was generally observed that the majority of *coolies* were not able to complete their prescribed daily tasks (*nirikh*) on Mondays.³⁷⁴ Fitzgerald, the manager of Chubwa tea garden in a reply to a circular regarding the working of outstill system in Assam in 1888, observed that, ‘...On Mondays the *coolies* take longer over their work, and some of them fail to accomplish their moderate tasks at all’. The unvarying and stereotyped excuse of the *Mohurirs* (native work supervisor) to this was, ‘They were drunk yesterday, they are feeling it to-day’. The manager of Suntok tea garden in his testimony also attests to this fact:

...I have to report that on Monday last only 111 men out of 151 on hoeing were able to do full tasks. This shortage was entirely due to drunkenness on the previous day. On Saturday evening I paid the factory, and on the following day a quantity of liquor was brought at the grog shops and brought into the lines. Some of the men were still drunk when they went to work on the Monday morning, and incapable of any attempt at work whatever.

Stewart, the manager of Athkel tea garden relates to a similar incident in his garden:

...Last Tuesday morning, I had brought up to me no less than 25 good strong healthy coolies, who were unable to finish their *nirikh* at hoeing on the previous day, owing to the after effects from drinking on Sunday. All these coolies are good workers and as a rule finish their *nirikh* early in the day and the majority of them owned up to the fact of not being able to finish their *nirikh* on account of having been drunk on Sunday.

The new anxieties of ‘work stoppages’, ‘absences’ and ‘general inefficiency’ of labour was apparently magnified during festivals, said to be marked by prolonged drinking bouts and the *coolies* not joining work in time. Begg, the Manager of Hoolungooree in a graphic description of the celebrations during the *Durga Puja* writes, ‘...the entertainment started this year (1901) on Saturday evening the nineteenth October’. On that evening his *line chowkidar*

³⁷⁴ In order to earn their daily wage (*hazira*) the *coolies* had to complete a standard daily task (*nirikh*) the payment for work over and above the standard task, amounted to what was called as *ticca* (or overtime work). The *nirikh* was not determined by a fixed amounts of hours put in daily by the *coolie*, but by the work assigned by the supervising authorities as constituting a reasonable day labour. There was an understanding in the planter-official circle that the *coolies* worked on a primitive, natural notion of time which effected this shift from a time-wage to a task-wage. The 1865 labour act fixed a minimum wage, subject to the completion of 9 hours daily and 6 days work in a week. But the 1882 Act, made the payment of wage subject to the completion of a daily task.

reported, 'We are unable to tell correctly who are in the lines and who are not, as many have gone to Moriani and Debrapur' (the places with liquor shops). On Sunday evening the report was, 'We have not the least idea who are in the lines and who are not, but there are fewer people in the lines than out of them. We trust, however, they will all return in due course'. But the *coolies* did not live up to their 'trust' and on Monday (the supposed day of joining work) at 11 o' clock AM, the report went 'Many have not returned yet, but are coming in gradually and many are drunk and unfit for work'. At 5, the same evening the report was 'All have returned barring 3 (2 women and a man). They were last seen at Moriani. The two women were sober, but the man was left lying drunk in a drain'.

Again, Grimston, the manager of Baliyan tea garden in Dibrugarh district recounts his 'horror-story' experience on giving leave on a major religious festival:

There have been various minor cases of drunkenness at various times, which have temporarily incapacitated coolies from work...I may also mention that, for three years, at the request of the native establishment of the garden, I gave leave for the Doorga Poojah festivals, to enable them to hold a big festival on the garden, but a good proportion of the coolies, owing to drunkenness, were unable to turn out to work the day following that on which their leave expired, and some of them were absent for several days.

This practice, claimed Grimston, '...disorganised the labour force to such an extent that I had to stop giving leave'. That drink facilitated such indiscipline, so crucial to continuation of the authority structure is attested to by a planter:

...While apart from the moral deterioration that ensues, from the Planters' point of view, there is an equally serious result, namely, that this demoralization nullifies the effect of "moral persuasion" and "personal respect," on which a Manager of a Tea Estate has in a great measure to rely to secure obedience, and the due observance of garden discipline and control, on which the existence of the estates as such depends.

That such controls were desired by the planters becomes evident from the 'Westland note':

...they (managers) often prefer that the shops (liquor shops) should be near their gardens rather than far away. In the first place, they can often in this way secure some sort of control over the shop and its doing; in the second place, they disapprove of their coolies going away to a distance, both because it involves loss of time, and

because it sometimes gives opportunities for their being tempted away to other employers.³⁷⁵

A colonial official of a tea district, writing in the late 1880s makes a very interesting observation about the growing criticism of the planters:

Their (planters) objection to liquor shops near their gardens are in no way based upon moral grounds, and there is no reason to suppose that they have any sort of regard for the spiritual welfare of the cooly, or take the smallest interest in temperance propaganda. What they do dislike is interference with their work, and the disturbances in the local bazaars, which many estates have established with the object of retaining *coolies*.³⁷⁶

This managerial discourse of ‘indiscipline and inefficiency’ and the attendant ‘loss of labour’ increasingly drew upon the growing moral (missionaries/temperance societies) and medical scientific discourse (doctors of tea gardens) emphasising the injuriousness caused by alcohol to the body and soul of the *coolie*/tea gardens. The doctor-medical discourse as the planter-managerial discourse was primarily concerned about the problems posed by drink and drinking to the process of work and its ability to extract surplus labour. This is made evident in a statement of a tea manager of Assam, where he says , ‘...Work (in the tea gardens) is often impeded by *coolies being incapacitated for labour by the over indulgence in these spurious spirits, thereby rendering an injury not only to the coolies but to the planter* (also)’.³⁷⁷ It was not the health (physical/moral) of the *coolie* perse, but the uninterrupted reproduction of the intensified labour process of the late nineteenth plantations, which underpinned these anxieties.

³⁷⁵ Westland was the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the late 1880s, and in a official reply called the Westland note written in August 1889, discussed the various issues regarding the excise administration of Assam, in context of the specific charges brought by the planters. Report to her Majesty’s Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, Nos 993-1020. NAI.

³⁷⁶ Correspondence regarding liquor traffic in Darjeeling and Questions in the House of Commons concerning the Liquor shops near tea gardens, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos. 204-218. NAI

³⁷⁷ W. Henderson, a tea manager (Assam valley) in a letter dated 8th October, 1888 to Messrs. Finlay, Muir & Co. In Correspondence regarding the Liquor Traffic and alleged prevalence of drunkenness in Assam and the Tea districts of Bengal, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos 219-227. Emphasis mine. NAI.

4.5. Drink and the Emerging Working Culture

From the last decades of the nineteenth century, the change in the policies of excise and nature of the plantations in Assam had a bearing on the meanings of drink and its relation to work organisation of plantations. The culture and meaning of drink, for the plantation *coolies* also showed signs of dynamism in this changed context of life and work in the colonial plantations of Assam.

The tea gardens of Assam from the middle decades of the nineteenth century had relied entirely on an immigrant labour population recruited through the agency of contractors and sardars and 'settled' on the plantations by contracts. The imported workers from the tribal regions of Chotanagpur and Central Provinces soon assumed a particular importance and preference among the employers in Assam tea gardens. . Like in other tribal societies, alcohol for the tribal *coolies* (Mundas, Santhals, and Oraons etc) had a particular social, cultural and religious signification. Drinking formed a crucial part of festivals and religious occasions. The Bengal excise commission of 1884, made detailed observations of the festivals and rituals of the tribals of Chotanagpur. Talking about six major festivals (Bandua, Sarul, Horul Charok, Bhansing Puja, Chhata and Kuramgar), it observed that it was a 'religious duty' for all persons, male and female, to drink the home-brewed *handia*. Libations of *handia* were offered to the gods, followed by dancing and celebration in which 'both sexes indulge freely in *handia*'. Again drink was said to important during social occasions of birth, marriage and death:

...In social ceremonies also drinking takes an important place. In marriages the bridegroom's party come to the house of the bride and bring with them provisions consisting of rice, fowls, kids, and about 4 seers of handia a head...A few days after the death of any person a ceremony is observed, the principal feature in which is a feast of the relatives, the same takes place at a birth, and about 4 seers of handia to each person is considered a fair allowance...The operation of brewing is carried on solely by the women.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁸ In a an anthropological survey of the alcoholic beverages among tribals in India, J.K. Roy argues that not only are the alcoholic beverages (especially home-brewed rice beer) important in social, cultural, occasions, but also that it formed a part of the diet, having significant nutritive value. He cites the case of the tribals from certain regions of north eastern India, Madhya Pradesh and in Great Nicobar, who meet 5 to 10% of their requirements of essential nutrients like calories, protein, calcium and vitamin B-1 from home fermented beers or from the fermented toddies. See *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883-84. Vol I.* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 340 and J.K. Roy, Alcoholic Beverages in Tribal India and their Nutritional Role. *Man in India* (December, 1978.) pp.312-322.

The home brewed rice beer (pachwai) was the drink of preference, and absolutely essential on moments of cultural and religious significance. This was confirmed to by a religious missionary, Stevenson, stationed in Chotanagpur, in his testimony to the Bengal Excise Commision, when he commented on the drinking behaviour of Santhals (a prominent tribe in the tea gardens of Assam):

Sonthals are a drinking people, but did not as a rule drink distilled liquor, their drink being rice-beer...Pachwai is used by Sonthals at their feasts, when they would not use spirits.³⁷⁹

The commission made this observation:

They (Sonthals) prefer handia, but when they cannot get it they will drink shop-made pachwai, and even in some cases outstill spirits; the women, however, who observe their tribal customs more strictly than the men, will not drink anything but handia home-brewed.³⁸⁰

The patterns, occasions and meanings of drink of tribal *coolies* were alive to the changed context of life and work in the tea gardens of Assam. Home-brewed rice beer remained the drink of preference of the tribal *coolies* in the plantations of Assam throughout , and the administrative to ‘assess’ ‘check’ and ‘tax’ it met with little success. But there was also a growing trend of not always brewing the beer at home but also buying it. But, at least from the last decades of the nineteenth century, the consumption of distilled spirits by the *coolie* population showed a pattern of steady growth. One could not miss the close correlation between the increasing number of *coolie* from the tribal districts of Chotanagpur and Central Provinces and the rising excise revenue from country spirits in the province of Assam.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883-84, Vol II, Evidence of witnesses* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 183.

³⁸⁰ *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883-84. Vol I* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 340

³⁸¹ *Papers relating to the excise administration in Assam* (London, 1904) p.2.

Year	Average annual importation of <i>coolies</i> from the Central Provinces and Chota Nagpur	Average annual increase in excise revenue from country spirits
1881-85	10,704	...
1886-90	16,967	22,101
1891-95	20,121	30,146
1896-1900	32,002	38,779

gration from Central Provinces and Chota Nagpur related to growing Excise revenue 1881-1900

This pattern argued a colonial official, was borne out of the shift in the setting of life and work (agricultural sector to plantations) of the *coolies*:

It is, no doubt, probably true that *coolies* generally drink more distilled spirit after coming to Assam than they did before they left their homes, and the reason is not far to seek. While rice-beer can be prepared by the aboriginal labourer or peasant without difficulty in his home, the only apparatus required being a earthen pot, and the only materials rice,- his staple food, -and some herbs, distilled spirit if not illicitly prepared, must be purchased with cash, and, whatever may have been the condition of life of the *coolie* before he was recruited, there can be no doubt that more cash passes through his hands after he has taken service on a tea garden than before. If he was an agricultural labourer in his native district, he probably received a large portion of his wages in kind, or if a peasant farmer, he subsisted partly on the produce of his fields.³⁸²

Generally, he argued that, ‘...it would probably be found on enquiry throughout India that *coolies* employed in factories, mills, and mines consume more spirits than they did before they left their native districts to take up such employment’.

It was not just the type of alcoholic drink which was undergoing a process of change (home brewed beer to distilled country spirits) but the rhythms of drink was also responding to the changed circumstances. Drinking, and the occasions for a drink, now was not just dependant on rhythms of tradition and

³⁸² *Papers relating to the excise administration in Assam* (London, 1904) p.2.

culture (religious ceremonies, festivals, marriage, birth and death) but also to the emerging rhythms of work.

This has to be situated in the context of the establishment and systematisation of routines of life and work on plantations observed in this period. There was a greater incidence of plantations working on a 'weekly-cycle' of work from Monday to Saturday, with Sunday being the weekly holiday. Salaries (*hazira*), assessed on the basis of daily work, were also paid on a weekly basis (on Saturdays generally), in time before the weekly markets (*haats*). The culture of 'weekend drinking', therefore gradually assumed a frequent practice in the plantations of Assam. Workers at the end of their weekly toil, with cash in hand, indulged in long drinking sprees with their fellow workers.

The low muster on Monday, the very general complaint of managers, was the after effects of these long drinking bouts. Garden *Haats*, from where the *coolies* purchased their weekly necessities, and often where the liquor shops were located, became the site of these weekly drinking occasions. Drink, and the weekend drinks in particular, became a crucial axis of sociability of plantation workers, cutting across lines region, language and ethnicity.³⁸³ It assumed all the more significance because the patterns of work and life within the plantation were attempted to be drawn on the lines of race and ethnicity.³⁸⁴

The gendering of such spaces and especially of drink, a feature of the contemporary plantations, was not so evident during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The tribal practice of communal drinking did not make a distinction between men and women, and this was continued in the plantations also. However, the gendering of work in the plantation where the

³⁸³ A recent anthropological/sociological study of the plantation workers in Assam argues that, '...though they (plantation workers) are ethnically different in their homeland yet by virtue of their sharing common world-view, folklore, songs, dance, food and drink, like 'Handia,' these scattered people formed 'drinking clusters' which ultimately lead to form social clusters, again in Assam tea gardens. 'World view of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand' by P.P. Mahato in *In Tea Garden Labourers Of North East India: A Multidimensional Study on the Adivasis of the Tea gardens of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) p.133.

³⁸⁴ That such patterns and rhythms of drink in the tea gardens of Assam, survive till this day, is confirmed by the findings of an anthropological survey in the tea gardens of Assam under the People of India series. See K.S. Singh (General ed.) and B.K. Bordoloi and R.K. Athaparia (ed.) *People of India, Assam, Vol XV (Part I and II)* (Calcutta, 2003) pp.143, 565, 573, 651, 658, and 678.

males did the 'hard' manual work of hoeing, digging, clearing etc and the females 'nimble' plucking and the related construction of drink as source of stimulation and masculinity had its implications on drink and drinking patterns in the late twentieth century.³⁸⁵

4.6. The Controls of Drink and Drinking Workers

Colonial state was alive to such changed circumstances of drink on the tea gardens and the new critiques of drinking (planters, doctors, missionaries and the native middle class). It attempted a balancing act between its right to tax the drink and the manager's right to control the drink. Acknowledging to such changed concerns of the planters, the Chief Commissioner of the province in the late nineteenth century writes:

When there is a shop in the neighbourhood the men drink when they like, and their time is often a very inconvenient time to the person who has to make them work. When rum is issued by the planter, he takes care to issue it only when he thinks it is wanted for health or as a stimulant to work.³⁸⁶

There was a distinct policy from the 1880s to offer the manager's the licenses of country liquor shops in tea districts at reduced rates. Also the sites of liquor shops in the tea districts were often reviewed and changed when the local opinion (read planter opinion) went against it.³⁸⁷ Such 'privileges' bestowed on

³⁸⁵ In the contemporary tea gardens of Dooars (West Bengal) Piya Chatterjee, locates the presence of the alcoholic worker- *Matal*, as typically male and as an archetype of working class masculinity with its proclivity to alcohol. Also she argues that it justifies the gendered order of the plantations' regime, where this figure is pitted against the docile, disciplined feminine labour. P. Chatterjee, *An Empire of Drink: Gender, Labor and the Historical economies of Alcohol. Journal of Historical Sociology* 16, no. 2 (June 2003)

³⁸⁶ Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7-8, Part B.

³⁸⁷ Till the late 1870s, the provincial administration keen on increasing its low returns on excise was against such policies of closure. In a circular dated July, 1877, from the Excise Commissioner, Williamson to all the District Commissioners of the plain districts, it was mentioned that, '... (the administration) can see no sufficient reason for the sacrifice of the excise revenue in closing or removing the shops under such circumstances(of complaints by tea managers)...If it should appear that, owing to any breach of the conditions of the license, annoyance is caused to the planter, or greater facilities are given in any way than those sanctioned by law for the sale of liquor to garden *coolies*, the Deputy Commissioner should take measures to punish the license-holders in the prescribed manner...Shops cannot be closed merely to suited the convenience of neighbouring land-owners.' This policy was reworked in the 1880s, and the planter's opinion was invariably sought. Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7-8, Part B.

the managers became as a new avenue of making some 'fast and easy money'. Attempts at monopolisation and killing competition, something they were so used to, and at times even subletting was blatantly practiced. Importantly, such practices were not just was not profitable from the monetary sense, but allowed new controls for managers over their working population, which the new system was so obviously threatening.

In 1883, the District Commissioner of Cachar in his report complained that the managers were refusing to allow any liquor shops within their grants, and in four cases the licensees had to resign their licenses to the garden *muharrir*.³⁸⁸ Again, in the year 1885, a manager of the Assam valley tea garden made objections to the location of a liquor shop and got it cancelled. Subsequently, he himself took up the license at a reduced fee (The licensee had got the license for Rs. 125, while the manager paid only Rs. 100 for the same).³⁸⁹ That such objections made by the planters regarding the location of liquor shops were often motivated, can also be illustrated from the case of a Cachar tea manager who made a similar objection. The shop in question was located for several years on the estate any complaints. Infact the license to the shop till the previous year was held by the manager and was only cancelled, when he was found to have sublet the shop to a local firm of liquor dealers. His objection initially was not entertained by the local administration. But on a further objection received from the manager of a neighbouring garden, the shop was closed.³⁹⁰

There were reports of planters demanding exorbitant fees from licensees for 'prime location' (*haats*) within the tea gardens.³⁹¹ Cases of getting licenses at reduced rates and subletting it to the liquor dealers at a higher rate were also in abundance. For example in year 1902, in Cachar, out of the five liquor shops settled by the local administration with the planters, four were sublet to the very people they were initially objecting to. The Deputy Commissioner of the

³⁸⁸ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1883-84.

³⁸⁹ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1885-86

³⁹⁰ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1902-03.

³⁹¹ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1884-85 and 1888-89

district from his experience was of the opinion that, ‘unless the shops are not taken over by the respective tea companies and worked as a part of their business, settlement should not be made with planters, as most of them are quite incapable of resisting the combined temptation of being freed from trouble and responsibility and making a handsome profit by subletting’.³⁹²

In his enquiry into the excise system of Assam in 1889, the Excise Commissioner talked about such tendencies of the plantation managers regarding liquor shops:

In districts of Sylhet and Cachar, and more particularly so in the latter district, many shops are situated on tea-gardens, and the abkars are under the patronage of the managers...they pay comparatively large sums as rents to the managers for small plots...managers are naturally anxious to support, and are urged by their native employees (sometimes these are interested in the shops) to support. If a new shop is opened, or any attempt made to open one, and there is a probability of any of the customers of the old shop being induced to patronize it, strong objections are urged, and every possible ground is brought forward, and the matter is then looked at from a moral aspect, and the charge is made that we are augmenting the number of shops and inducing *coolies* to drink by putting temptation in their way. The question of the loss to the existing shop is kept back...as a rule, planters do not object to liquor shops, but to any act that will injure the shops which they are interested in maintaining.³⁹³

The attempts to control the drink gained a particular urgency and purpose in the first decade of the twentieth century. There were reports of managers strictly controlling the issue of rice to the coolies.³⁹⁴ A concept of the ‘ticket system’ was mooted by some planters and even recommended by the Buckingham enquiry. It suggested that the sale of liquor from the shops to the coolies should be made only on the production of ‘liquor tickets’, issued by the garden management. The idea of ‘canteen system’ floated by a superintendent of a tea company in Jorhat (Mr. Showers) in 1902, attracted a lot a attention in the planter-official circles, as an innovative idea of controlling the coolie drink. The man in question, in consultation with the managers of neighbouring garden took out the license for the local liquor shop (at a much reduced rates), and opened a liquor canteen in each of the five garden served by this shop. This made the controls on the timing and amount of the drink in accordance

³⁹² *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1902-03*

³⁹³ J.J.S. Driberg, *Report on the Special Enquiry into the Excise on Country Spirits in Assam* (Shillong, 1890) pp.24-25.

³⁹⁴ *Report of the Indian Excise Committee, 1905-06* (Madras, 1907) p.73.

with the work schedule of the plantations possible. The shops served by this canteen were open only for two hours in the afternoon on week-days and in the mornings on Sundays.³⁹⁵

4.7. Conclusions

The drink question in the tea gardens of Assam, as it were, was a product of convergence of various processes and changes undergoing in the colonial context of the late nineteenth century. The colonial state claiming to work under the policy of 'maximum revenue from minimum consumption' asserted its right of taxing the '*coolie* drink', by checking his home brewed stuff and offering them with opportunities to buy the 'legal liquor' instead. Again a stabilization of plantation since had several implications. A degree of mechanization of the production process necessitated the work process in the fields to be reconstituted. Specialization of tasks and closer supervision of workers attended the changing work organization in search for an ever greater efficiency and productivity. This suggested a move from an exclusive violent strategy of work intensification rampant in the 1860s; but it did not mark a clear departure from these disciplinary practices. The problem of drinking was rooted in this shift where a new demand for 'time work discipline' produced the anxieties of plantation capitalism of drinking coolies. Yet the stigma of drink was not desired to be eradicated, for planters knew its ritualistic and stimulative roles in a working population which valued it socially and culturally; but had to be controlled and channelized to fuel the engine of plantation capitalism.

Again the planter concerns and strategies alluded to the cultures of work and leisure of coolies being produced and reproduced in a changing and stabilizing plantation context. From a ritualistic, religious, it now also conveyed other purposes and meanings in a changed context of life and work. Such a changed manifested not just in what one drank (home made rice-beer / distilled spirits from shops) but also when one drank. The occasions to drink were now not just contingent on the social and cultural rhythms (religious occasions, festivities,

³⁹⁵ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1902-03, 1903-04 & 1904-05.*

birth, marriage, death) but also on rhythms of work (weekend drinking). Drinking became a crucial axis of sociability and haats, the sites of such consolidations.

5. Towards a New Contract on Plantations: Dustoor and Protest

5.1 Introduction

A process of “stabilisation” of the plantation structure in Assam (since the 1870s) marked a shift from the isolated and unsustainable clearance sites (of the early 1860s). The early sites characterised by a remarkable degree of labour “unsettlement” and counteracted by planters through privatised arrest and violent disciplining—as made feasible by Assam contract.³⁹⁶ A relatively “settled” and “systematising” nature of plantations revealed other modes of intensifying the specialising work process and controlling the workers but, at the same time, there was no clear break from earlier modes of labour settlement and control.³⁹⁷

Such “novel” strategies seemed to have occasioned the change of managers of Jellupur (Cachar), Bhagaicherra (Sylhet) and Barjan (Sibsagar) in the year 1896.³⁹⁸ Within the space of a few days, there were assaults and organised attacks directed towards the new sets of authority. In one instance, the bungalow of the manager was torched. In an incident reported from Madhabpur garden (Sylhet, 1902), the workers attacked the manager who had come to their residential lines to take their hoes, which they were used to retain.³⁹⁹ A more glaring instance of “reaction” occurred on the Rowmari tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1903). Workers of this garden used to umbrellas while working in the rain, were being compelled to switch to *Jhampis* (a kind of wide

³⁹⁶ For details see Chapter 2.

³⁹⁷ For instance, the question of coolie drinking was perceived an infringement to the work process was sought to be controlled and mobilised by the Assam planters. This was reminiscent of the opium question of the late 1830s, where the perceived addiction of the Assamese was to be channelized to the plantation project through a ban of cultivation and making them available only through government shops. This planters believed would compel the Assamese peasant to offer services to tea gardens for cash payments, not only to pay their revenue but also to serve an addiction. Such a strategy did not find an approval of the colonial state at that point. For details see Chapter 1 and 4.

³⁹⁸ List of serious cases of assault on tea gardens of Assam, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

³⁹⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

brimmed hat). This followed a sequence of assaults targeting the management and a “mass walkout” of workers from the plantation.⁴⁰⁰

These incidents of “*coolie* violence”, appearing with a greater frequency in the colonial archives of the late nineteenth century, hinted at the deepening colonial concerns about the “deteriorating” relationship between managers and *coolies* on the tea gardens.⁴⁰¹ Like the “unpopularity” of *cha-bagaan* and the escalating incidence of *coolie* drinking, the overt “friction” within the tea-gardens posed a threat to the plantation work process.⁴⁰² Colonial reporting and reasoning had for long subscribed to the stereotype of the “ignorant” “primitive” *coolies* responding to their elementary instincts of passion and violence.⁴⁰³ One of earliest provincial labour reports, mentioning the ‘nature of

⁴⁰⁰ House of Commons question on a coolie riot at a tea garden in Assam as a result of which, 42 coolies have been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment 22nd July, 1903. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

⁴⁰¹ This was a change in language in comparison to the 1860s—seen exclusively through the prism of desertion/unsettlement. In the early 1870s, a manager from Cachar narrating the labour difficulties purely characterised the workers as ‘insolent, defiant and insubordinate.’ An exclusive concern with desertion/unsettlement and personalised defiance became untenable in light of the systematic “abuses” reported in recruiting and widespread “unpopularity” of Assam tea gardens. In the late 1880s, the colonial establishment in Fort William in a communication for preparation of a special report on the workings of the 1882 Act instructed the provincial establishment in Assam to ‘supply more definite and fuller information on the following points...i.e. relations between the coolies and planters’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.47; *Government of India Despatch, dated the 22nd day of June 1889, with its enclosures, including Reports by Mr. Tucker; and of Memorial of the Indian Association of Calcutta, dated the 12th day of April 1888* (London, 1889) p.7

⁴⁰² According to a colonial communication circulated in 1897, the cases of conflict on Assam plantations had now to be “specially” reported. The colonial anxieties can further be gauged by the increasing volume of correspondence relating to “assaults” “collisions” and “disturbances” on Assam tea gardens in this period. Home A, Dec 1897, nos. 86-87, ASA ; List of serious cases of assault on tea gardens of Assam, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA; Collisions between Managers and Coolies on tea gardens of Assam. Home A, nos. 33-34, Sep 1899, ASA; Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.30-34, June 1903, ASA; Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos. 98-112, January 1904, ASA. The cases here are drawn from these sources unless otherwise mentioned.

⁴⁰³ For instance, in the late 1880s, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (Dennis Fitzpatrick) reacting to the reported cases of conflicts reasoned that ‘with about nine hundred tea gardens employing upwards of 300,000 *primitive ignorant coolies*, such a state of matter was inevitable’. He was extremely critical of the native vernacular press for ‘sensationalising’ these minor instances and thereby ‘detering’ the distressed people from going to Assam. Approximately a decade later, another Chief Commissioner (Henry Cotton) in a similar vein contended that ‘it can hardly be expected that such an enormous population of *absolutely uneducated and in many cases, semi savage labourers*, occasional instances of friction and

relations between managers and *coolie*', framed the instances of conflict as purely "isolated", which did not reveal any 'determined or premeditated resistance'.⁴⁰⁴ The exceptional "brutal planter" perpetrating tough methods of disciplining was often seen as that provocation.⁴⁰⁵

Protest action assuming a collective form has a much longer presence on the Assam plantations. The Kacharis, who worked on the Assam company plantations in the 1840s and 1850s, exhibited a degree of concert and purpose around issues of wages, timing of payment and supply of rice—leading to several work stoppages and strikes. The initial reason for the planters to contract (through Act XIII) and introduce another class of *coolies* (i.e. the so called imported Bengalis) was deeply embedded in such labour difficulties.⁴⁰⁶

The planter anxieties of "unsettlement" of migrant workers (in the 1860s) was not limited to the incidence of high mortality and individual desertions, but was informed by a degree of "collective" response to the deplorable conditions of work and life on the new clearances. There were several instances of

collision should not occur.' Collisions between Managers and Coolies on tea gardens of Assam. Home A, nos. 33-34, Sep 1899. ASA.

⁴⁰⁴ This view was shared by the Bengali investigator who argued that '...it is scarcely possible for ignorant and timid coolies to resist such oppression by organised opposition'. *Assam Labour Report*, 1884, p.4; *The Bengalee* 27, no.48 (Dec 11, 1886) p.569 reprinted in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p.35.

⁴⁰⁵ The brutal planter image having strong lineages from the slave plantations came to be invoked in Assam plantations, when violence and especially flogging started being reported from the 1860s. The colonial invocation was individualised and purely seen as isolated and exceptional as was the case of Dunn—an Assam company manager who was found guilty of flogging the workers (See Chapter 2). This was in contrast to a more general representation of Assam planters as excessive and brutal—in the writings and literary productions of the local intelligentsia (especially Bengal). In a strong rebuttal to this growing trend, a planter writing in the early 1880s suggests that '...It (Brutal planter) has been sounded and maintained in India by people who were in English nurseries at the time that the Indian press gave the preliminary howl; the howl, strange to say, that has been applied to the various communities of planters all the world over—West Indian, South American, Tirhoot, Wynaad....because, many years ago, a few isolated cases of ill-treatment came before the public notice in India, tea-planters have ever since been stamped with the mark of the beast, and officially looked upon almost in the light of quasi-slave-drivers.' Such a line of reasoning was furthered by an ex-Chief Commissioner of Assam who claimed that, '...in the midst the many hundreds of managers that are employed there must be some who are unworthy, and scandals have not been unknown.' *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867); N. Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Michigan, 2004) pp.35-37; D. Ganguli, *Slavery in the British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972); S. Baildon, *The Tea Industry of India* p.150; B. Fuller, *The Empire of India* (London, 1913) p.204.

⁴⁰⁶ See Chapter 2.

workers moving en masse out of these sites, making complaints to the magistrate stationed at the district headquarters for acts of abuse, difficult nature of work, misrepresentation of the recruiters, and non-payment of the due wages.⁴⁰⁷ The formalisation of Assam contract, with explicit powers for planters to privately arrest and implicit approval to privately discipline, was unleashed to counteract the responsiveness of workers to the circumstances of employment and life on the plantations.

Keeping such qualifications in mind, the present chapter does not intend to posit that worker protest only make an appearance at a given “moment” in the history of Assam plantations. It rather seeks to explore its shifting form and nature and how it was embedded in the changing practices of plantation life and work. The first section will firmly situate the particular context of this interrogation. A major concern in such an exercise is to explore the idioms gaining currency like—*dustoor* (customary)—through which collective anxiety and action came to be framed and articulated. *Dustoor*, as elucidated by a provincial official, were ‘certain local practices varying from garden to garden and on particular points possibly even conflicting with rules...the details of which *coolies* are intimately acquainted’. Resentment and unrest on tea-gardens, he went on to suggest, was the consequence ‘of departure from (*dustoors*) in a direction unfavourable to them (*coolies*)’.⁴⁰⁸ The episodes of “unrest”, cited at the outset, seem to confirm this observation. The workers on the different gardens used to a *dustoor*—a particular manager, a particular

⁴⁰⁷ See Chapter 2.

⁴⁰⁸ This statement was made in response to an assertion made in a provincial labour report. The report suggested that the ‘*coolies* have a degree of awareness that the *conditions of their employment are regulated by rules, not by the bargaining of the market*; the rules are unfavourable to them in some respects, but favourable to them in other and they resent any attempt to exact more labour than the rules warrant.’ The allusion to custom hinted at the domain beyond the strict framework of contract. This revealed the limitations of the overbearing contract and its rules in framing the conditions of life and work on the plantations. The ‘custom of the garden’ did not always agree with the ‘rule of contract’. This goes in line with assertion made by Anderson who argues that in India contract did not become a common reference point for constituting mutual obligations. These derived instead from relationship of hierarchy and deference, which were constantly being remade in the workplace. Assam Labour Report, 1902-1903, p.12; Letter from P.G. Meltius, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam dated 6th May, 1904, Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA. M. Anderson, ‘India, 1858-1930: The Illusion of free labour’ in Craven and Hay (ed.) *Master, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2004) p.451.

practice (keeping the hoes, using umbrellas) or broadly a particular custom—were resisting its change.

Recognising the analytical purchase of the notion of *dustoor*, the discussion will refrain from employing it in this restricted sense. *Dustoor*, as this chapter will argue, does not imply a yearning for a reified culture or an unchanging custom, but alludes to a developing expression of an “acceptable” conduct of a tea garden—an “unwritten contract” between workers and managers.⁴⁰⁹ This expression (of what was acceptable) did become a site of bargaining between workers and managers.⁴¹⁰ This contest, at times, assumed an episodic “collective” nature. *Coolies* participated in the process of ascertaining the boundaries of what was acceptable, by acting in a context of its perceived outrage. The instances of the “serious disturbances” (read collective forms of protest) on tea gardens as explained by another officer from the Assam colonial establishment:

Was often due to the idea (well founded or otherwise) that wages are too low, the introduction of some new *dustoor* or some indiscretion on the part of the manager. Some act of the manager may in itself be sufficient cause for the disturbance, but it is generally not sufficient in itself to account for the *serious disturbance that sometimes occur, in which the majority of a labour force take part*.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ This draws from the notion of ‘moral economy’ as conceptualised by Thompson and Scott. Thompson’s reading of the food riots of eighteenth century England situates certain “legitimising notions” emanating out of a desire to defend ‘traditional rights or customs.’ The notion of moral economy in Scott’s analysis develops how the norm of reciprocity and the rights to subsistence informs the peasant action in South East Asia under colonial rule. These ideas are further reinforced by Bhattacharya’s discussion of labouring poor, where he argues a common a commonality in ‘cultural terms’ where ‘reference point is not wage slavery under capital, but poverty and the life of labour in everyday experience. E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present*, no.50 (Feb, 1971) pp.76-136; J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, 1974).

⁴¹⁰ Such bargaining has been argued in the context of Calcutta jute mill workers in the colonial period. For instance, Chakrabarty argues that the notions of ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’ informed the worker’s protest and action, ‘where the worker reacted when he saw himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly his’. Again Basu reads the jute workers’ politics as being strongly influenced by notions of customary rights based on mutuality of shared interests at workplaces. D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton, 1989) p.178; S. Basu, ‘The Paradox of Peasant-Worker: Re-Conceptualizing workers’ Politics in Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no.1 (2007) pp.47-74.

⁴¹¹ These incidents which were unreported earlier were later collapsed under overarching categories of “unlawful assemblies” and “rioting”. Just in the period from 1885-1890, there were 416 cases of unlawful assemblies and 529 incidents of rioting on the tea gardens of Assam. H.L. Thomas, Sub divisional officer, South Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet dated 23rd January 1904. Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA; *Assam Labour Report* for the years, 1884 pp.6-7; 1885 p.5; 1887 pp.8-9; 1888 p.34; 1889 pp.19-20; 1890 p.20; S. Bose, Indian

The anxieties and necessity to act collectively, as emanating from the material and social life on the tea garden, will be detailed and discussed in the subsequent sections. This ranges from a breakdown of cultural norms, violence on the part of managers, payment of short wages, and stoppage of fixed price rice. At times, it was considered as illegitimate to “wrong” a woman as to arbitrarily increase the tasks. Here, “collective” is not used as a short hand for an “undifferentiated *coolie* community” residing in the garden, nor implied to be the “pre-existing” identities of ethnicity/caste/religion within them. The discussion will be attentive to ascertain how the recurring contingencies to act “collectively” related to the “solidarities” constituted, reconstituted and transformed in the practices of work and life on the plantations.⁴¹²

Before engaging with these lines of enquiry, two preliminary caveats are in order. First, this exercise does not intend to imply that the conditions of operation of life and work of tea *coolies* in the plantations were favourably “negotiated” and coercion/violence was always resisted. The interest in such an exercise is not to qualify the notion of “oppressive tea garden” by the practices of “resisting *coolies*”. This is more to foreground the forms of protest—assuming a collective nature, as embedded in the practices of plantation life and work of the period. Secondly, this is not to construct a hierarchy between the confrontational collective and non-confrontational individualised modes of protest, valorising in effect the “flashes of outbursts” in neglect to the “everyday forms of protest”.⁴¹³

Labour Historiography and its Historiography in the Pre-Independence Period, *Social Scientist* 13, no. 4 (April 1985) p.9.

⁴¹² The “solidarities” formed during the process of migration, work and life and “contingencies” to collectively act emerging to address overlapping concerns, rather being exclusive, in effect reinforce each other. This moves away from a unilinear process of “class formation” towards greater politicization as observed in some other contexts. See, S. Bhowmick, *Class Formation in the Plantation System* (Delhi, 1981).

⁴¹³ M. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World that Slaves Made*. (New York, 1972) 285-324; D.E. Haynes and G. Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (1991) pp.1-22. Also see M. Adas, ‘From Foot-dragging to Flight: The Evasive History of Peasant Avoidance Protest in South and South-east Asia. and A.L. Stoler, Plantation Politics and Protest on Sumatra Coast in J.C.Scott and B.J.T. Kerkvliet (ed.) *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South East Asia*(New Haven,1984) pp.64-86; pp.124-143.

5.2 Dustoor and Assam Tea Gardens in the late nineteenth century

Workers on the late nineteenth century plantations, apart from their daily tasks on the fields and factories, also carried out agricultural activities on the rice-lands, which the managers selectively rented out to them. It was promoted by the management, as a part of the cost of reproduction of the workforce was shifted to the agricultural sector, making a below subsistence wage and a flexible working force possible.⁴¹⁴ This was also a planter's strategy of "settlement" beyond the contract, which was assuming some consequence during this period, especially in the district of Sylhet in Surma Valley.⁴¹⁵ However, during the tea manufacturing season, when the demands for working hands were at its peak, the worker's participation in her/his own agrarian activities was deemed as an interference.⁴¹⁶ A tea manager (Sylhet, 1902), operating along those lines, arrived at the residential quarters of the workers (*coolie lines*) to collect the hoes, which they were using for their own agricultural activities. Workers used to the *dustoor* (of keeping their hoes)—that contributed to their material subsistence (agriculture)—could not come to

⁴¹⁴ R. Dasgupta, 'From Peasant to Tribesmen to Plantation workers' in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp.19-23.

⁴¹⁵ In the late 1880s, the ceiling for plantations leasing out land to workers without special permission was up to ten percent of the total grant of land or a maximum of two hundred acres. The 1906 enquiry particularly favoured the positive results in Surma valley of planters settling their workers on the garden rice lands and they did not show resentment (as Assam valley planters) for allowing the time-expired workers some land outside the garden grant. This was the outcome of different strategies of settlement in the two valleys. Citing the case of the district of Sylhet, the report mentioned that the rice lands given to workers formed an integral part of their income and workers tended to move to gardens giving rice land. One garden of the district parcelled out five hundred acres of land for a working population of about three thousand. *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906); R. Dasgupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994) p.158; K. Dasgupta, 'Wasteland Colonization Policy and Peasantization of ex-Plantation Labour in the Brahmaputra Valley' in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp.35-50.

⁴¹⁶ There were managers interviewed by the 1906 enquiry who favoured a strategy of land settlement but also felt that the cultivation work on these land often takes workers off work during the manufacturing season. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p .155.

terms with the legitimacy of its “change”, and made an organised attack on the offending manager.⁴¹⁷

Such modifications were symptomatic of an intensified work process, most visibly manifested in the case of introduction of hats (*Jhampis*) in Rowmari (Lakhimpur, 1903). Investigation of the incident revealed that the garden, of late, was practising harsher work discipline and production speedups.⁴¹⁸ Among the numerous amendments initiated, it was also realised that the *coolies* using hats made them more “productive”, by allowing the use of both the hands for plucking work. This flexibility was not feasible in the prevailing mode of holding an umbrella during work. The “unpopular” move manifested in assaults on the manager, the assistant manager, and the head clerk. The protesting party (about two hundred) marched on to Dibrugarh (district headquarters) and assembled in front of the Magistrate’s office (*Kutcherry*) ventilating their concerns to the colonial authorities. Military force had to be called in to disperse the crowd. This was a moment of unusual success for the workers. The colonial report on the incident concluded that ‘they (*coolies*) will use umbrellas and the managers have generally had to give in’.⁴¹⁹

The Rowmari affair was not an isolated case and some other incidents in this period alluded to these concerns. For instance, determined action directed at the management transpired on Joyhing tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1896) when the manager tried to extend the “working week” by forcing work on Sundays. Again, when the manager of Adabari garden (Sylhet, 1897) compelled the workers to the fields on a particular Sunday, there was a general feeling of discontent. Shortly after, the women workers working in the tea-house (factory) attacked the European assistant with their umbrellas and threw him

⁴¹⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904. ASA.

⁴¹⁸ R. Behal and P. Mohapatra: ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos.3&4 (1992) pp.165-166.

⁴¹⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

over into a ditch. Several male workers, who were present in the scene, stood looking on, encouraging the women.⁴²⁰

Such a process can also be illustrated by a photograph from the early twentieth century depicting the daily operation of field work on a tea garden. The practices of employing water carriers (Pani-wallah), especially during the peak season—as shown in the photograph—was not simply instituted to “benefit” the workers, but were usually sporadic measure to minimise breaks and persist the incessant process of work.⁴²¹ This becomes evident in a “hypothetical” dialogue noted in the planter language handbook, where the worker on telling a manager that s/he was thirsty, is promptly told by him that ‘*Paniwallah* is bringing water’.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ John Kelly in a study on Fiji plantations cites a similar report by an overseer of Fiji plantation of work-gangs of women *coolies* disciplining their European overseers by capturing them, beating them, immobilising them and urinating on them. Such an act argues Kelly, had a sexual dimension to it, for the ‘dignity of the overseer, his masculine, sexual, controlling persona could not survive it.’ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA; J. D. Kelly ‘Coolie’ as a Labour Commodity: Race, Sex, and European Dignity in Colonial Fiji in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos.3&4 (1992) pp. 259-263.

⁴²¹ Photograph titled *Carrying water for tea coolies* is roughly from the later decades of the nineteenth century and forms part of a private collection of W. Pratt who is the great granddaughter of an ex Cachar planter named Samuel Davidson (1846-1921). Davidson was the manager of Burkhola tea garden in the late 1860s till the late 1870s, and has also been credited for several innovations in tea manufacture and machinery. W. Pratt, *Life with Tea and India: Diaries of Family life in the Cachar area*, Spring Lecture meeting, Families in British India Society, 22nd May 2010. See <http://www.koi-hai.com>; <http://www.new.fibis.org/?s=tea>

⁴²² *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927).

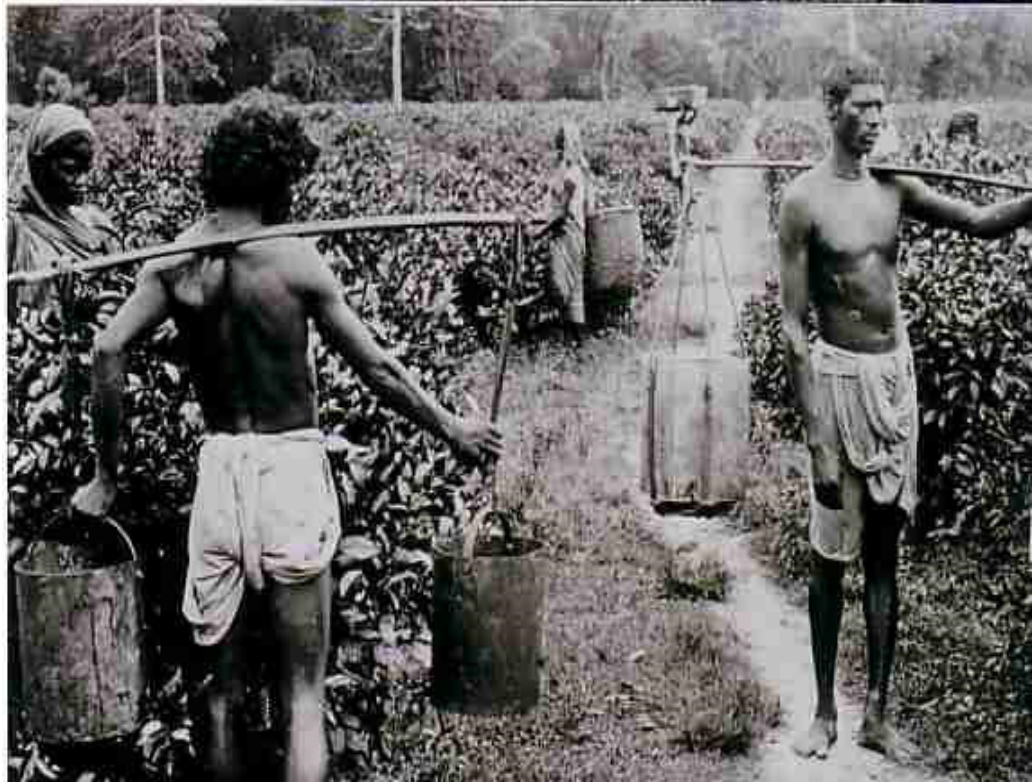


Figure 5.1: Garden *Paniwallah* (Water Carrier)

The intensification of the working day became the theme of many confrontations. For instance, the workers (numbering 150-200) of Khorikotia garden (Sibsagar, 1899), went up to the manager and complained that they are deprived of a longer “break” during the work day. This led to an animated exchange with the manager, who caught a worker by his hair and threw him down. Soon, the assembled workers turned on the manager and he received several blows from their *lathies* (sticks). Some sixty workers of Sephanjuri (Sylhet, 1902) made a combined protest on the refusal of the manager to give them leave. A quantity of plucked leaf was thrown away and a large body of *coolies* left the garden. The report of an altercation from a South Sylhet tea garden (Sylhet, 1903) mentioned, ‘(that the) disturbance was due to a general reduction in wages and a consistent refusal to grant leave during the busy season’.⁴²³

⁴²³ HL Thomas, Subdivisional officer, South Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet dated 23rd January 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

A modification in the rhythms of work and enforcement of stricter discipline were manifesting in the change of *dustoor*—from keeping hoes to giving up hoes, from umbrellas to hats, and from Sunday being holiday to becoming a working day. Revisions of *dustoor*, in these cases, encoded moves to restructure the organisation and conduct of work. This generated a collective sense of outrage and a growing necessity to act.

The manufacturing season, when the workers were expected to turn up earlier, was often marked by the absence of a rest day (especially Sunday), as obligated by the contract.⁴²⁴ Moreover, workers were habitually allocated overtime work, which according to some contemporary was not entirely voluntary.⁴²⁵ These tendencies were facilitated by the contract(s) and many specific plantation practices, which empowered the managers to induce workers to toil harder and longer, affecting the health and well-being of the workers.⁴²⁶ An Assam valley manager felt that the arrest rights were

⁴²⁴ The protective clauses of Assam contract which ensured a paid weekly holiday became largely irrelevant because of the establishing remuneration methods based daily earnings according to ‘tasks’ completed. Such revisions and especially forcing labour on Sundays found some resonance in the ideas of “unpopularity” of work on Assam plantations. An early and typical planter concern for Sundays being deemed a holiday was voiced in 1872 where a manager from Upper Assam suggested that, ‘...Sundays where mostly no work is done, is alone an item of most serious moment to us all (planters).’ He went to statistically suggest that this ‘arbitrarily increases all expenditure by some fourteen percent’ This “saving” as he further mentioned’ would enable all of us who cannot now import (workers)’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.105

⁴²⁵ C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.47.

⁴²⁶ The relationship between overwork and sickness came to ‘scientifically’ defined and medically identified in the late nineteenth century Assam plantations. An instance of the effects of “overwork” was exemplified in the case of Dhinkari tea garden (Assam Valley) by a sanitary investigation to “explain” the high rates of mortality—which in the period from 1884 to 1887 consistently maintained annual rates of higher than 8%. The investigation revealed that this one hundred and eighty acres large estate, producing an average yield of 550 pounds of tea per acre, had a working population of one hundred sixty. This was deemed as an “unhealthy” condition of work according to the current scientific/medical opinion. It was argued that gardens producing more than 300 pounds of tea per acre required a minimum of one adult *coolie* per acre of working force. The medical report concluded that the, ‘coolies were often put to overtime and extra work, to prevent a waste of growing leaf. Insufficient labour was one of the main causes of sicknesses. *Assam Labour Report*, 1887, p.32; R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos.3&4 (1992) p.160.

particularly necessary and essential because it ‘prevented the *coolie* from sitting idle’.⁴²⁷

Alluding to the general pervasiveness of such work intensification strategies and practices, a colonial official from Assam valley noted, ‘that in order to secure economy, a stricter discipline has been enforced on many gardens and owing to the shortage of labour, *coolies* are turned out to work willy nilly. Work on the tea gardens has become more irksome’. Yet, at the same time, he also perceived certain “limits” to these drives. He went on to suggest ‘that the *coolies* being better acquainted with their rights are more disinclined to endure the strict discipline under which they are kept’.⁴²⁸

5.3 The Shifting Authority of Manager

The execution of tea garden discipline was often attributed to the methods and functioning of the manager—the *Sahib*.⁴²⁹ This, as already discussed, was conditioned by the legislative and extra-legislative constructions of his “exceptional” authority, and its consequent bearing on the social and work relations of the plantations. Writing in the late nineteenth century, an Assam manager asserted with this confidence ‘that he (planter) is vested with a good deal of power and authority—partly by law, but mostly by *coolie* tradition and

⁴²⁷ *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 153.

⁴²⁸ Apart from the changes in productivity (See Chapter 5) there was a general decline in the working population of Assam valley by four percent between 1900 and 1903. In the same period the area under tea cultivation however increased by ten percent. D.H. Lees, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang to the Commissioner of Assam Valley in a letter dated 21st April 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴²⁹ The manager of a tea garden (*Sahib*) in the late nineteenth century ranged from a sole European (and sometimes Indian) in charge of a smaller tea garden, to larger establishments (1000 acres and above) employing a head European in charge (*Burra Sahib*) above one or more assistants (*Chota Sahib*). The assistants often had distinct roles. One of them was delegated to oversee field work and the other, generally a mechanical engineer, looked after the work in the factory and was responsible for the quality and quantity of tea manufactured. The manager earned anything between Rs. 450 and Rs. 600 and some larger companies (like Assam and Jorehaut Company) even allowed them a share in the profits. The assistants’ salary could range from anything between Rs. 50 and Rs.250 with a pony allowance, a house, and one or two servants. ‘Life in an Indian Tea District’, *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, no. 772 (Oct 12, 1878) p.653; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.8; H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London,1948) p.273; S. Ward, *A Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.115; J. Weatherstone, *The Pioneers, 1825-1900: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and their way of Life* (London, 1986) pp.78-80; T. Kinney, *Old Times in Assam* (Calcutta, 1896) p.26.

his own self-assertion', where in all events, 'he is generally quite able to cope with any tendency to kick over the traces'.⁴³⁰ Another manager, fairly competent in stamping his writ, was being recollected with a sense of admiration by his assistant (Sylhet, 1890s):

Charlie (the Manager) was a first-class planter who ruled with a rod of iron. He was not loved by his labour, but feared, and the discipline at Chandpore (tea garden) was unique even for Sylhet (the district). No detail was too small for his attention. Each operation, plucking, pruning, or planting, was carried out with the maximum of efficiency.⁴³¹



Figure 5.2: Assam Tea Managers and Assistants.⁴³²

A persistent invocation of fear and punishment did not take away from the fact that the deep linkages between violent planter practices and the execution of work/control objectives was being reconstituted in a period of relative

⁴³⁰ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.206.

⁴³¹ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁴³² Group of European tea managers and assistants (Photo 1903 or before). NAA INV 04423501, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

settlement and continuity. Now the idioms of “approval” were also assuming some relevance.⁴³³ This is not to deny the continued bearing of coercion and physical violence on the managerial authority, but rather to emphasise the elements of “reciprocity” in the manifestation of that authority.⁴³⁴ In such a framework, it is futile to personify the Assam planters as either “coolie-drivers” or “benevolent paternalists”.⁴³⁵

Also, the aspirations of managers to wield the “rod of iron”, could not be homogeneously and consistently realised, being contingent on spatial and contextual variables. The rhythms and routines of plantation did become an arena of acceptance, negotiation and even overt resistance.⁴³⁶ A general “tempering” of planter power was noted by a colonial district commissioner:

In former years, the planter was supreme on his garden, *he maintained discipline by his own methods, and untrammelled by law...* nowadays the *coolie* has a fair knowledge of the labour laws, gained by his experience, and is usually well capable of looking after his interest.⁴³⁷

A shift (in planter power) has to also be situated in the changing stance of colonial authorities with respect to the unilateral arrogations of magisterial privileges by managers, which was largely endorsed in practice. A colonial district officer, writing in 1904, observed that ‘any affray between a planter

⁴³³ A shift from an unrestrained ‘violent’ strategy of work discipline is noted in a planter textbook of the period. The author advising the managers suggests that ‘it should be made an absolute and unbending rule at all times that no assistant is allowed to lift his hand’. It went on to recommend that ‘there are other ways of punishing offenders, and it is manager’s business to allot such punishment.’ C. Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1922) p.318.

⁴³⁴ For instance, the desire of the managers to regulate and dispense the drink of the *coolie* was not just driven by the urge to limit its interference to the work process. It was also founded on such reciprocal ties—which the circulation of such an object entailed. See Chapter 4. Also see S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp.159-160.

⁴³⁵ R. Behal, ‘Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture system’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010).

⁴³⁶ This is very much in agreement with what has been argued in the context of Kanpur Jute mill workers ‘where the work culture and discipline were not created by state regulations and managerial strategies alone; these are constituted through sedimented practices, through acts of resistance, through conformity with rules.’ C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds* (London, 2005) p.143.

⁴³⁷ H.W.G. Cole, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur to the Commissioner of Assam valley Districts. Letter dated 9th March 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904. ASA. Emphasis mine.

and *coolie* (now) is viewed through a magnifying glass, whereas formerly many occurrences of this kind altogether escaped notice'.⁴³⁸ A closer attention to the planter "excesses" was also a manifestation of the many scandals of Assam tea gardens—like cases of kidnapping, oppression and torture—being debated in press, public forums, books, and becoming a theme of numerous official and non-official writings.⁴³⁹ In such a charged climate, the colonial state's "rethinking" of the Assam contract system and especially the privilege of private arrest, at least tolerated an impression of incorporating the "spaces of exception" within the "jurisdiction of law".⁴⁴⁰ Apart from a much publicised criticism made by the Chief Commissioner of the province, there were

⁴³⁸ Ann Stoler presents a striking shift in the perceptions of "protest" of the Dutch administrative and plantation elite of colonial Sumatra. The labour violence was largely personalized and downplayed in the 1870s. By the 1920s, it came to be construed as a politically motivated prelude to communist revolution. DC Sylhet to Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sylhet 16th March 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA; A. Stoler, 'Perceptions of Protest: Defining the dangerous in colonial Sumatra', *American Ethnologist* 12, no.4 (Nov. 1985) pp.642-658.

⁴³⁹ As far back as the late 1880s, the Indian Associations' memorial detailing the abuses in free recruitment and the harsh life of *coolies* on plantations received a fairly widespread media attention. For instance, just in the year 1888, the following newspapers sympathetically covered the issue: *Hindoo Patriot*, Calcutta, May 21st; *The East*, Dacca, May 26th; *Anand Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 24th; *The Tribune*, Lahore, May 23rd; *Mahratta*, Poona, May 27th; *Hindu*, Madras, May 30th; *Peoples' Friend*, Madras, May 30th; *National Guardian*, Calcutta, June 1st. The Anti-slavery reporter had reported the incidents of violence and flogging in Assam tea gardens in the late 1860s. It stepped up its attention on the Assam *coolie* system—especially since the 1890s. See, 'Coolie Labour in the Tea Gardens of India', *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines' Friend* 13, no.6 (November 1893.) pp.346-348; 'Contract Labour in Assam', *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines' Friend* 21, no.2 (March 1901) pp.64-66; 'The Labour System in Assam', *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines' Friend* 24, no.4 (Aug 1904) pp.134-135. Again the Assam *coolie* question found place in the "national" economic histories being written in the period and was seen as another instance of the exploitation of British rule. See, G.S. Aiyar, *Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India* (Madras, 1903) pp.180-181; R.C. Dutt, *India in the Victorian Age; An Economic History of the People* (London, 1904) p.352. Also see D. Ganguli, *Slavery in the British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972); A. Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* (1946, Bombay) pp.50-51; T. Mishra, 'The Image of West in Asamiya Literature' in C. Vijayasree (ed.) *Writing the West, 1750-1947: Representations from Indian Languages* (Delhi, 2004) pp.18-19.

⁴⁴⁰ For instance, since the year 1904 there was a more comprehensive and extensive tabulation of incidents of "rioting", "unlawful" assembly etc. in the annual labour reports of Assam. This was the outcome of a greater concern of the colonial state with respect to these incidents which were deemed earlier to be the private affair of planters and tea gardens. The 1902-1903 labour report in light of reported riots suggested that it 'throws upon state some responsibility for preventing any injustice as would give the *coolies* a substantial grievance.' R. Behal, 'Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930', *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 26th 1985) p. PE-20; P. Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p.378; E. Kolsky, 'Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam', in M. D. Dubber and L. Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007) p.287.

concerns raised by other authorities.⁴⁴¹ For instance, the Commissioner of Assam valley districts opined that ‘the original justification for the grant of the power (of private arrest) to the planters was because of the fact that courts were difficult to access’. This premise, he argued ‘owing to the improved communications, has to great extent been removed’.⁴⁴² Again, another Chief Commissioner noted that the numerous cases of “disturbances” on tea gardens cannot be ‘effectively ascertained in court’. He strongly recommended that the ‘proceedings of a trying magistrate should, wherever possible, include a local investigation to be held upon the garden’.⁴⁴³ The Chief Commissioner duly issued a circular calling for ‘on the spot’ enquiry by the Inspector of labourer or any other European official of the district.⁴⁴⁴ Such state intervention was systematically despised by planters from the inception of the contract system. This was again questioned in a planter textbook where the author advised his readers (planters) that ‘no appeal should be made to the law except in extreme need. Police officers are best kept off the estate if possible’.⁴⁴⁵ Yet, the premises of such “exceptions” were no longer as persuasive. The rationale for their protection was no longer so compelling. This meant that there were other attempts to generate “knowledge” about the conditions of life and work on

⁴⁴¹ Henry Cotton was the Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1896 till 1902. In the 1900 labour report for Cottons’ views showed a strong departure from the positions held by him and other Chief Commissioners on the *coolie* labour question. Cotton cited specific instances of low wages and state of indebtedness of workers on tea gardens. He further showed the inefficacy of inspections and the depressing effect of hard work on birth rate. In cases of conflict between the managers and workers, he noted that the magistrates had often proven themselves for giving biased verdicts. The Indian Tea association lodged a strong protest to the Government of India arguing that Cotton’s case was not ‘warranted by facts’. Yet, the allegations voiced by individuals in significant official position only reinforced the idea of “unpopular” Assam tea gardens—where every instance of manager-worker conflict was seen with increased scepticism as a commentary on the system as a whole.

⁴⁴² F.J. Mohanan, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.199.

⁴⁴³ Letter from Secretary to Chief Com of Assam to Registrar, High Court Calcutta dated 6th Oct 1902. Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, no. 31, June 1903, ASA.

⁴⁴⁴ Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos. 30-34, June 1903, ASA.

⁴⁴⁵ C. Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1908) p.319.

plantations beyond the sanitary gaze—which was the predominant grid of the nineteenth colonial state’s intervention.⁴⁴⁶

The shifting dynamics of absolute authority of managers was also echoed in the gestures of managers to “familiarise” themselves with the culturally and linguistically diverse working population. Following in the spirit of Robert Bruce, who felt the necessity to copiously note and graphically demonstrate the Chinese methods of tea manufacture in the 1840s, the managers and tea companies were finding some value in compiling and consulting language handbooks.⁴⁴⁷ A striking evidence of an endeavour to comprehend the *coolie bat* (*coolie* talk) was a handwritten language guide composed by a new assistant in the early twentieth century.

⁴⁴⁶ Till the late 1890s, the routine inspection reports of tea gardens made by the Civil Surgeon of district primarily supplied information under the heads like the nature of house accommodation, water-supply, medical attendance, hospital accommodation, general sanitary arrangements, and food supply. The inspectors were merely advised to notice the ‘general’ treatment and condition of labourers. *Physical and Political geography of the province of Assam* (Shillong, 1896) p.131; *Compilation of the Circulars and General Orders of the Chief Commissioner of Assam* (Shillong, 1885) pp.79-93.

⁴⁴⁷ The joint stock company Finlay Muir in its “standing instructions” to their representative visiting the tea gardens mentioned that they should assess and make notes of any new assistant (manager) engaged by the company for their knowledge of the vernacular. This formed a crucial basis for the increase in salary the fourth year, and the bonus for such knowledge. At the same time, it mentioned that the number of labour absconding was to be ‘carefully noted against a manager’. *Standing instructions for the Tea Estates Department of Messrs Finlay Muir & Co. Calcutta* (Glasgow, 1900).

Coolie Bat.	
	As it is from.
Ant (White)	(ooloo.)
All	(Sub.)
All together	(Sub ka sub)
After	(ka'd.) (puchle')
Again	(Fai)
Another	(Dutra) (Dura)
Any	(Kaoch.)
Any where	(Kisi jagah)
are (present)	(Hai)
account (take)	(Waste')
Attach to, or	(lagna)
Apply	(lagna)
Absence	(Andas)
Account	(Kaal)
Acquire to	(pana)
Answer	(jawab)
Along with me	(Humera sath)

Perhaps	Hi juri
Previously	age 20
Plantiful	loot
Picture	laguer, ruber
Purse	lots
Put to	Rakhna
Produce	Kaal
Pudding	Putin
Putty	Putin
Pipe	chong
Pay	tukut
Place	jagah, turup
Plucking Leaf	Patter tulta
Pluck to	Toolna
Pluck (Snip)	nebuldo
Prune to	Khaluni Katna
Put down to	tieke Rakhna
Paper	Caguo
Pepper	Minick

Figure 5.3: Coolie Bat or the Coolie Talk⁴⁴⁸

These manuals did not merely serve the purpose of a cultural/language grounding for the intending managers and assistants, but also came in handy for achieving the diverse objectives of work and discipline on the plantations. For instance, a young European assistant learning the “tricks of the trade” was passed on with “native” phrases by the manager, which he diligently scribbled down in a notebook. He recounted how he would direct workers during field work by shouting phrases like: *Ek angle se lumba; aurney* (Just the size of one

⁴⁴⁸ This sixty page handwritten "Coolie Bat" dictionary was compiled by William Tulloch Charleson—an assistant who joined the Deundi tea estate in Sylhet in the 1910s. For more details of Deundi tea garden during this period see W M Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935); <http://www.koi-hai.com/archives.html>. Also see, *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book*, Savara (Calcutta, 1927); F. Hahn, *Kurukh Grammar* (Calcutta, 1911) pp.152-156; S. Endle, *Outline Grammar of the Kachari (Bara) Language* (Shillong, 1884) pp.60, 64-66.

finger; not more) and *Sub beyfahida dhal nikaldo* (Remove the useless sticks).⁴⁴⁹ This is also characteristic of Charlesons' handwritten phrase book, where tasks like to prune (*Khatum katna*) and pluck (*toolna*) find a prominent mention.⁴⁵⁰

At times, a change of manager familiar with such nuances precipitated a "crisis" because it brought in its wake new symmetries of work and discipline.⁴⁵¹ This was reiterated by a colonial official, who felt that a new charge lacked '(an) intimate knowledge of their *coolies* and their wants which is necessary for the successful working of a garden in the Assam system under which an employer directly deals with the *coolies*'.⁴⁵² This seems to have been the case in an episode of collective action directed at the management of Tehapara garden (Sylhet, 1916). Investigations revealed that the workers were gravely disgruntled with certain rules and the practices of discipline initiated by the new manager. After an incident of assault by the manager, the entire *coolie*-labour population of the garden consisting of hundreds of men, women and children collected near the dispensary and confined the manager, his assistant, head *babu*, native doctor and a *sardar* in a stable. Bricks and bamboo sticks were pelted on the detained party.⁴⁵³ Another "unpopular" new manager showing excessive zeal in direction of "reform" caned one of the workers;

⁴⁴⁹W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁴⁵⁰ See Figure 5.3

⁴⁵¹ For instance, Antrobus mentions in his book Jorehaut tea Company that it favoured a policy of 'continuity of management, not only because of its maintenance of a consistent policy of cultivation, upkeep and manufacture, but by reason of the contented labour force'. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948) p.269.

⁴⁵² This view was most emphatically made in 1906 Assam Labour enquiry commission report, which they emphasised a 'direct' organisation of work and management in Assam in comparison to the other tea growing regions (Duars and Ceylon)—which worked through different intermediaries. In this particular instance, the commissioner of Cachar underlined this point through an example of contrasts of two tea gardens in the district—Dolu and Barkhola—showing differential rates of desertion (7 and 46 respectively) after a new manager had assumed office. While the manager of Dolu (Milne) had spent a greater part of his working life in Cachar and appreciated the "specificities" of Cachar, the manager of Barkhola had 'acquired his experience in Darjeeling and Terai' and adopted a new system of management. The change in management was seen as more "excessive" because the manager tried to implement the Assam contract and also 'raised the hoeing task, and made other changes...such as compelling all to appear at muster'. *Assam Labour Report*, 1890, p.188.

⁴⁵³ Letter from BC Allen Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India. Home Department, Police Branch, No 103, Part B, March 1916. NAI.

whereupon the workers beat him severely.⁴⁵⁴ The concerted actions of workers targeting the management in Jellupur (Cachar), Bhagaicherra (Sylhet) and Barjan (Sibsagar), in the year 1896, was occasioned by a new manager assuming office on these gardens.⁴⁵⁵

5.4. The Rice Question

The significance of rice in the everyday life of the working population was critical, as it was the main cereal consumed by a vast majority of the workers.⁴⁵⁶ A regular provision of rice was an overriding concern for the Kacharis residing on the isolated Assam Company plantations in the 1840s and 1850s. The ability of the Company gardens to hold Kachari labour depended on its capacity to sustain its rice supplies.⁴⁵⁷ The provision of rice for the workers was “institutionalised” through these early struggles and a notion of entitlement which materialised with a discourse of *coolie* protection in the contract. A certain quantity of rice, at a predetermined price, was made available to the *coolies*, which constituted an integral part of the “non-wage benefit”. There was no standardised practice and quantity of dispensing rice “benefits”, and it varied from district to district, and even from one garden to the other.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ *Assam Labour Report*, 1884, p.4.

⁴⁵⁵ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁵⁶ Rice was the staple cereal for migrants coming from ‘tribal’ regions of Chotanagpur, Central Provinces and Orissa. The growing relevance of the recruiting region like North West Provinces and Bihar (especially in Sylhet district) generated a view in planter-official circles, that wheat (flour) rather than rice constituted their main diet of the new migrants. A theory offered for the high rates of mortality—often associated with upcountry *coolies*—was said to have been a consequence of this change of diet (from wheat to rice). There were several official steps to change the nature of food allowances during transit and even the “fixed price rice” on the tea gardens. See Chapter 2 for details.

⁴⁵⁷ For concerns around rice leading to work stoppages and strikes in the Assam company plantations, see chapter 1.

⁴⁵⁸ The rice supplied to the workers was generically called ‘*coolie rice*’ in the Calcutta market, which many contemporary observers noted for generally being of an inferior and poor quality. One scientific investigator mentioned some of the names (with different qualities) of *coolie* rice supplied in different gardens: *Kazla no.1*, *Kazla no. 2*, *Jhabra* and *Kalachitu*. H. Mann, ‘Note on the Diet of Tea Garden *Coolies* in Upper Assam and its Nutritive Value’, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 3, no.2 (Feb. 1907) p.104; C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p.29.

The reconstitution of the “protection” of *coolie*, made through amendments to the Assam contract in the late nineteenth century, also made such provisions exceedingly irregular.⁴⁵⁹ Planters often rationalised these “cuts” by claiming that the changing dietary profile of the workers did not necessitate a fixation with rice. A colonial officer noted that the ‘quantity of rice imported by the tea gardens in Assam (around 1900) was much less than twenty or thirty years ago’.⁴⁶⁰ The logic of reductions and apprehensions regarding the necessity of dispensing rice found “voice” in a planter language manual:

Do you eat all the rice you buy from the garden store?

Do you resell it at a higher price?

Do you make liquor from it?⁴⁶¹

However, another planter bitterly grumbled that the ‘clause (of contract) concerning the sale of rice has always proved the most difficult to deal with’. He particularly observed that the ‘*coolies* did not trouble the garden when prices rule low, but when prices are high the garden is at once requisitioned and no matter whether there is stock or not, rice has to be forthcoming at the stipulated price’.⁴⁶² The question of rice-supplies figured prominently in the official interrogation of the new recruits proceeding to Assam, to gauge their awareness of the circumstances of their employment. The “stereotyped” queries posed by the registering officer were allegedly responded by answers “tutored” by the recruiters and contractors:

Recruiting officer: At what price will rice be supplied to you?

Coolie: At three rupees a maund.

Recruiting officer: If the price of rice be more than three rupees who will pay the difference?

⁴⁵⁹ *Assam Labour Report*, 1888, p.70.

⁴⁶⁰ Such a sentiment is reflected in a statement made by the manager of Assam Company, where he described the ‘fixed price rice’ as a ‘loss’ which drained the company of one thousand rupees every year. *Enquiry into the causes of friction between the planters and coolies*, August 1904, no.98. ASA; *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p.164. Also see, D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.48; S. R. Ward, *Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp.125-126.

⁴⁶¹ *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p.60.

⁴⁶² G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp.159-160.

Coolie: The sirkar (employer).⁴⁶³

Contrary to many such apprehensions, the price of rice and the deductions made on account of rice advanced, suggested a commissioner of a tea district, was one of most recurring issues of dispute between managers and *coolies*.⁴⁶⁴

For instance, when the manager of Bardeobam tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1900) terminated the *dustoor* of allowing rice advances, the *coolies* of the garden made a collective demonstration and declined to work.⁴⁶⁵ Again, in Kharbon garden (Lakhimpur, 1904), the usual allotment of rice given to female-*coolies* under contract was downscaled. The manager (Macnidoie) after giving out the reduced amount on the day of distribution was assaulted by the *coolies* of the garden with bricks and bamboos.⁴⁶⁶ Similarly, the workers of Towkok garden (Sibsagar, 1894) came in a body and demanded rice from the garden store on a day which was not the customary rice distribution day. On being denied the “exception”, the agitated *coolies* made a charge towards the store and confronted the men guarding it.⁴⁶⁷

In these separate episodes, the alteration of *dustoor* of rice (discontinuation of advances and reduction of amount) could have adversely impacted the general material condition and the food-security of the plantation’s population.⁴⁶⁸ The rice procurable at the weekly market (*haats*) was usually priced higher and also affected by the geographical setting of the garden.⁴⁶⁹ The gardens located in the “interiors” obtained food grains at a much higher rate and the supplies were

⁴⁶³ *Assam Labour Report*, 1888, p.12; *The Bengalee* 27, no.39 (Sep.25, 1886) p.461 cited in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p.3.

⁴⁶⁴ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁶⁵ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁸ Such dependence of plantation population on importation and discharge is not specific to Assam. For instance in colonial Sumatra, the estate industry were almost wholly dependent on imported rice. A. Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt* (Ann Arbor, 1995) p.41.

⁴⁶⁹ These variations of such markets was noted by the colonial observers who particularly observed that in some districts the weekly markets were the immediate vicinity of tea gardens, and were of great convenience to the garden labourers. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical account of Assam*, Vol. 1 (London, 1879) p.143.

extremely irregular due to indifferent communication networks.⁴⁷⁰ These insecurities induced by the uneven nature of rice supplies were articulated in a general refusal of work and organised action targeting the offending manager.

The relevance of rice in the changing material circumstances of the resident population was also articulated in the demand for a change in the timings of its discharge. *Coolies* did not merely resent to the stoppage or reduction on the rice concessions (*dustoor*), but expected the garden management to respond to the situations of want and scarcity. Such discrepancies were particularly felt by the newer *coolies*. Some new *coolies* of Bordubi garden (Lakhimpur, 1902) refused to work alleging that they were not allotted enough rice. When the manager tried to force them to get back to work, he was attacked. Eventually he had to use his revolver to scare them off.⁴⁷¹ A colonial report noted that the so called “non-Act” *coolies* (not contracted under Assam contract), who were “legally” not entitled to the fixed price rice (like Assam contracted workers), would “expect” the managers to make some rice available at a reduced price when the market rates went up. The “rights” of control (like private arrest), which managers frequently claimed over the Act XIII contracted workers, generated complimentary obligations of protection (like fixed price rice).⁴⁷² Further, the centrality of rice in the daily subsistence of the resident workers made such claims “legitimate”.

5.5 The Occasions of Tea Garden

The emergence and institutionalisation of occasions like rice distribution day has to be situated in the milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁴⁷⁰ The Sanitary Commissioner of Assam made a survey of the “food situation” on the tea gardens in the late 1870s. He found the centrality of rice in the diet of workers was also because of the expensiveness of other food items procured in the open market. *Assam Sanitary Report* 1878 and 1879, pp.7-10, pp.15-18.

⁴⁷¹ The practice of dieting the new arrivals as regulated by ordinances in the colonies was never regulated by legal enactments on Assam tea gardens. The practice of giving rice to new *coolies* was suggested in Ceylon plantations, where the language handbook mentions: The *Kangani* addressing the planter says: ‘Sir, the two new *coolies* have arrived, please issue them rice and cash.’ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA; W.G.B. Wells, *Cooly Tamil, as understood by Labourers on Tea and Rubber estates* (Colombo, 1915) p.68; *Assam Labour Report*, 1889, p.80.

⁴⁷² The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p.146.

century life on plantations. On this day, the workers would collect in front of the rice godown to receive their supplies. The manager positioned himself at the gate of the godown and distributed the rice according to the individual allotments and the nature of their contracts.

An analogous occasion taking shape on late nineteenth century plantations was the pay-day. This was the occasion when workers would get remunerated for their work. They assembled at an assigned place at a pre-given time which is depicted in the next photograph.

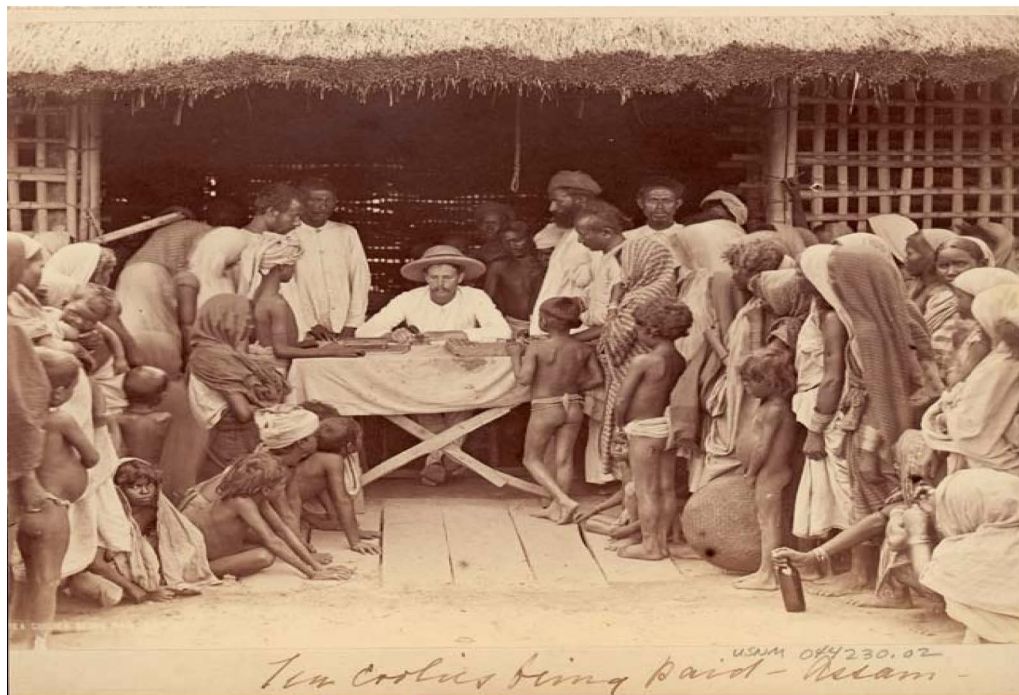


Figure 5.4: Pay Day.⁴⁷³

In this scene, the manager conducts the payment. The assessment of *Kamjari* (outdoor work) and *Haziri* book (attendance register) was placed on the table.⁴⁷⁴ The gathered *coolies* waited for their turn to receive wages. A manager recounted the occasion of payment in some detail:

⁴⁷³ Assamese Tea receiving payment from a man at a table n.d. NAA INV 04423002, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁷⁴ The managing agents and the visiting agents to see that managers pay their own *coolies*, and, in their absence, their European assistants. *Standing instructions for the Tea Estates Department of Messrs Finlay Muir & Co. Calcutta* (Glasgow, 1900).

On pay-day...men, women, and children—in fact, all the *coolies* present themselves, attired in the best, outside the bungalow or wherever the ceremony of paying is to be performed. They are called up by name and in rotation to receive their wages; a few have part of their money cut for idleness and insubordination, but with these exceptions all receive their pay in full and depart happily.⁴⁷⁵

The days of rice distribution, payment and muster emerging from the culture of work and remuneration, assumed the nature of rituals on the plantations—to be participated at a recurring moment (daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly) depending on the prevailing *dustoor* of the garden.⁴⁷⁶ These occasions held the potential of “collecting” the entire *coolie*-labour population of the garden at one place and at a given time.



Figure 5.5: Mustering the coolies⁴⁷⁷

The presence of the manager/management made these occasions particularly conducive for the organisation and collective expression of concerns,

⁴⁷⁵ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.176

⁴⁷⁶ This also seems to have some lineages from slave plantations where the weekly distribution of provisions were treated as paternalistic rituals. ‘..By dramatizing a sense of mutual obligations between masters and slaves, the ritual was designed to help promote a sense of community on the plantation. The ceremonial giving in itself served to emphasize the master’s reputed benevolence and promote the slaves’ gratitude.’ C.W. Joyner *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana, 1999) pp.94-95.

⁴⁷⁷ Mustering Assamese Tea Coolies at Factory. NAA INV 04422901, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

emanating from overlapping anxieties.⁴⁷⁸ This was manifest in case of Kharbon garden (Lakhimpur, 1904), where the rice distribution day became the occasion for such a contest when the manager arbitrarily reduced the rice quota of the women workers.⁴⁷⁹

Again, on one pay-day in Barhalla tea garden (Sibsagar, 1892), the manager declined to pay a *coolie* (Harilas) and had him forcibly removed from the scene, when he raised objections for being denied his dues. The aggrieved individual called out the other assembled *coolies* to seize the manager. The *coolies* joined together and attacked the manager and his assistants with broken bricks and clay.⁴⁸⁰

On a particular pay day in Hukanpukri garden (Lakhimpur, 1900), a *coolie* protested that his overtime work (*ticca*) was under assessed. The assistant manager making the payments hit the dissenting man with his fist. The three hundred assembled workers then made a charge towards him. The assistant had to flee from the scene and take asylum in his bungalow, which was encircled by the *coolies*. They later broke inside the building, but the assistant along with the other European staff managed to flee. The party of *coolies* then proceeded to assault the native establishment of the garden, as they fancied that they had assisted the *sahibs* to get away.⁴⁸¹

These cases of “individuals” being disciplined for conveying her/his grievance on the estimation and payment of wages (non-payment, underassessment) took the nature of a collective response directed at the management. The events of pay-day had occasioned the larger solidarities to address the concerns. Such concerted action did not always materialize from grievances in the pressing

⁴⁷⁸ Pay days often became sites of conflict in other plantation contexts. For the sugar plantations of Trinidad, see K. Haraksingh, ‘The Worker & the Wage in a Plantation Economy’ in M. Turner (ed.) *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston, 1995) pp.224-240

⁴⁷⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁸⁰ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.; E. Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010) pp.176-177.

⁴⁸¹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

context of the occasion, but could become avenues for the articulation of older persisting concerns.

For instance, on the Khawang garden (Lakhimpur, 1914), the manager, during the daily inspection of field work, had reprimanded a female *coolie* (Durapati) for the quality of leaves being plucked. Later in the day when the women workers were being paid for their daily tasks, the manager kept Durapati waiting. She suspected that the manager would refuse to pay because of the “objections” during the day, and therefore urged the other assembled women to wait until her dues were paid. On finding such apprehensions coming true the women attacked the manager, who had to take refuge inside the office along with his head clerk. The *coolies* then laid a siege on the office and kept the manager confined for three hours. Windows were broken, abuses were hurled and broken bricks and like were thrown.⁴⁸²

The “new” occasions of payment (rice or wages) has to be situated in a context where there was a simultaneous process of production and reproduction of apparently “older” cultural/religious occasions in the changed milieu of the plantation.

David Crole, an ex-Assam planter, mentioning the most prominent of the “*coolie* festivities” on his garden (*Fagua*) remarked:

...*coolies* are given three or four days holiday...they enjoy themselves to the top of their bent, which end they attain by setting on foot a horrible debauch...abetted thereto by an old garden custom (still unfortunately kept up by many planters), according to which each *coolie* is supplied with a bottle of rum to commemorate the festive occasion...*coolie* often receives a certain amount of *baksheesh* from the planter.⁴⁸³

In the context of Ceylon plantations, James Duncan argues that the production of docile bodies (*coolies*) in the colonial plantations would ideally have necessitated the production of de-cultured workers. But the strategies to produce rationalized bodies were continually undermined as elements of worker’s networks and ways of life remained intact. This becomes relevant in the Assam plantations where occasions like drinking and festivities suggested

⁴⁸² King Emperor versus Durapati and nine others. Home Department, Police Branch, September 1914, No 139. NAI.

⁴⁸³ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.199.

that the decultured and docile bodies, as ideally required by the plantations, was not completely realised. However, Duncan's emphasis on 'remaining intact' does not fully appreciate the shifts such practices and "traditions" undergo in a dynamic context.⁴⁸⁴

Cultural/religious occasions being reproduced and produced in the plantation context also became sites where the legitimacy of discipline were tested and break from routines were negotiated.⁴⁸⁵ The managers on such occasions would usually allow leave to the *coolies*, gave them some additional cash and even made provisions of alcohol. The planter's language handbook underscoring the significance of these occasions duly included a separate section on *Poojah and Gods*. The potential themes of conservation between the managers and *coolies* with respect to such occasions are very suggestive:

Coolie: In five day's time is our Big *Pooja*, Sahib. May we have two day's leave?

Coolie: We want half day's leave for Kali *Pooja*.

Manager: To enable you to make purchases you will get daily cash payment for the work you do during three days preceding the *Pooja*.⁴⁸⁶

The exchanges between manager and *coolies* indicating to a general "acceptable" conduct, did not always hold true in practice. Three incidents, to that effect, can be cited. In the first case from Holonguri garden (Sibsagar, 1900), a demand of a holiday on *Kali puja* made by the Santhali workers was turned down. When the manager went down the lines on a horseback to induce

⁴⁸⁴ A fascinating instance of this is Hosay festival in colonial Trinidad, where Hindus and Sunnis apparently celebrated a Shia festival. Such a dynamic can also be located in the case of indentured labourers in Fiji, where the principal religious festival shifted from Holi to Diwali. James Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) p.69; P. Mohapatra, "'Following Custom'?: Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880-1920" in R. Behal & M. van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi) p.181-188; J. D. Kelly, 'From Holi to Diwali in Fiji: An Essay on Ritual and History' *Man* 23, no.1 (Mar.1988) pp.40-55.

⁴⁸⁵ Religious occasions have been read in different contexts as a site for defining work time and festive time. Festivals are sometimes seen as a time and space in which the everyday is temporarily replaced by interactions of a different sort. In the context of contemporary Jute mill workers, Fernandes argues that Durga Puja festival served both to legitimize and subvert the authority of union and managers. C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds* (London, 2005) p.242; G. De Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working lives in Indias' Informal Economy* (Delhi, 2005) p.239; L. Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia, 1997) p.93.

⁴⁸⁶ *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p.83-84.

them to work, a group of workers surrounded him with sticks in hands.⁴⁸⁷ In the other incident from Barjuli garden (Darrang, 1891), the workers resented on being forced to get back to work on the very next day of an important religious festival— *Karam puja*.⁴⁸⁸ The assistant manager on his daily rounds of the lines to turn the *coolies* out for work tried to pressurize some of them and assaulted a resisting *sardar*. The incensed *coolies* made a collective offensive on the assistant manager, chasing him out of the lines until his bungalow. Again, the manager and the assistant of Kellyden garden (Nowgong, 1898) forced the *coolies* to turn out for work, after three days' holiday given for *Fagua/Holi*. They encountered a general opposition. On the attempt of the assistant to hold a woman by the hand and induce her to go back to work, the *coolies* attacked him and the manager with sticks.⁴⁸⁹

These instances form part of a larger body of incidents of enforcement of harsh discipline and resistance to such moves. The coolies being turned out for work was attempted to be “routinised” in the daily life on the plantations. The contracts bestowed the authority to deem absences as illegal, and permit a degree of force and coercion to make the reluctant coolies comply—as and when required. This encouraged the systematic attempts of the unhealthy, unpopular and undermanned gardens to put a greater proportion of coolies under contract(s), not merely to curb “desertion”, but also enforce this daily work routine (Kamjari). But a sense of a general illegitimacy on being forced/ disciplined for their absence/leave from work was heightened by the significance of the moment, where shared cultural and communal practices

⁴⁸⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁸⁸ Festivals like *Karampuja* seem to have had strains of communitarian solidarity being reconstituted in the plantation context. During our fieldwork in the Duars plantation region (May-June 2000) we found that this was a festival practised by a majority of the labour population of the tea gardens. In this yearly ritual the branch of the tree *karam* is buried. This is further circulated throughout the labour line stopping at each quarter in which vermilion (this act of application of *sindur* is symbolic of the transfer of the evil spirits in the vicinity into the branch) was applied to the branch. Subsequently it is taken to a nearby river or stream where it was immersed. S. Chaudhury and N. Varma, ‘Between Gods/Goddesses/ Demons and ‘Science’: Perceptions of Health and Medicine among Plantation Labourers in Jalpaiguri District, Bengal’, *Social Scientist* 30, nos 5-6 (May-June 2002) p.32.

⁴⁸⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

were invoked. Again, the customs of leave and other benefits (*dustoor*) during such events, which varied according to the gardens/occasions, was negotiated.

5.6 Coolie Lines

Residential patterns of *coolie*-labour assume a particular relevance in the production of solidarities on the tea garden. However, these patterns were not uniformly consistent. A colonial medical investigator observed that ‘no condition that varies more widely than this (residence patterns) does in different gardens’.⁴⁹⁰ The organization of *coolie* dwellings in barracks and lines and its policing (*chaukidaring*) was embedded in the strategies of immobilisation and spatial surveillance. They also became a focal point of the sanitary policing of the unhealthy plantations.⁴⁹¹ The evidence of “*coolie* lines” appears from the early years of plantations in search for “settled” workers. A greater “systematisation” of the lines was desired in the late nineteenth century:

(*Coolie*) lines should be numbered, and there should be a *line-chokidar* for each double row of houses (or lines); also, each *sirdar*’s gang of men should, as many as possible, be housed in one line; of course, the women must go with their husbands..By this arrangement of having a *chokidar* and a *sirdar* responsible for the way each line is kept, and also for conduct of the *coolies* in that line will be kept in better order...less trouble will be experienced by those *chokidars* and *sardars* in turning the *coolies* out to work in the morning.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ G.M. Giles, *A Report of an Investigation into the Causes of the Diseases known in Assam as Kala Azar and Beri Beri* (Shillong, 1890) p.145.

⁴⁹¹ The high rates of mortality observed on tea plantations was often attributed to the sites of the lines. For instance, the high death rates (above 20 percent) observed in Borkhala tea garden (Darrang, 1879) and Shakomotho (Darrang, 1881), was said to be satisfactorily resolved by a change in location of respective *coolie* lines. A general template for the *coolie* lines was offered by a colonial medical officer (G.M. Giles) in the late 1890s, keeping in mind these ‘sanitary principles.’ *Assam Labour Report*, 1879 p.19; *Assam Labour Report*, 1881 p.21-22. G. M. Giles, *Tea garden sanitation, being a few remarks on the construction and sanitary arrangement of coolie lines, with special reference to the prevention of the disease known as anaemia of coolies, beri-beri, and anchylostomiasis* (Shillong, 1891).

⁴⁹² A degree of systematisation of *coolie* lines is also observed in the coffee plantations of Ceylon from the 1860s, in comparison to the 1840s and 1850s. Crole further noted that large plantations in Assam (with more than one thousand souls) had approximately half dozen *coolie* lines. These houses were thatched bamboo huts, each partitioned to hold four or sometimes more families. F.T.R. Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters’ Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p.68; J. Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) pp.84-85; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) pp.196-197.

Apart from being firmly located with the framework of the plantation policy of settling and controlling workers, the *coolie* lines functioned as critical sites for socialization, “festivities” and the new occasions like “weekend drinking”. Managers mostly required the ‘outsiders’ visiting the lines to be reported by the *chowkidars*. Though, they often expressed an inability to completely stop some visitors who were, generally, family and friends.⁴⁹³ The next photograph depicts an everyday scene of the *coolie* lines.



Figure 5.6: Coolie Lines.⁴⁹⁴

There was a distinctive attempt to organize the lines along ethnic/racial axes. A contemporary observed that the different tribes were housed on ‘separate rows of huts, as these people never mingle’.⁴⁹⁵ A planter described the everyday scene on the lines where ‘the *tom tom* sounds; men chaunt, and women dance’.⁴⁹⁶ In a similar tone, another planter narrated that ‘rarely a night

⁴⁹³ S. Baidon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp.172-173.

⁴⁹⁴ Living Quarters of Assamese Tea Coolies. NAA INV 04423702, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁹⁵ Such a strategy of organising lines on basis of caste and village origins was also practised on Ceylon coffee plantations. S. R. Ward, *Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.115; J. Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) pp.84-85.

⁴⁹⁶ S. Baidon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) p.165.

passes in the lines but there is some form of festivity going on and in the season of the native holidays and on Sunday the din is terrific, five or six tum-tums all going at once'.⁴⁹⁷ Here, a clear identification of the different tribes and caste cannot be decisively established. Also, the recruited batches (arkatti and sardari) being housed together were not always clusters of "family and kins", but were groups being forged during the process of recruitment, settlement and work. The reproduction of older identities through an "ethnicised" recruitment and residential strategy competed with the production of new identities in the processes of mobilisation, work and life on the plantations.⁴⁹⁸ A strict cordoning of the different *coolie lines* and *bastis* could not always be sustained, and there was a measure of traffic between them. Time-expired workers frequently moved between the garden and the *basti*, retaining familial and social ties with workers on the garden. Markets and *Haats*—emerging within the confines or in the vicinity of plantations—also became the sites for such interactions.⁴⁹⁹

5.7 Work Place, Authority Structure and Issues of Tasks and Wages

The processes of socialisation had a bearing on the articulation of anxieties at the workplace, where other associations were being produced in the operation of work. Here, it is crucial to reiterate the practices of work and wage assessment in place on Assam plantations of the period. The workers, in order to earn her/his daily wage (*hazira*), had to complete a daily task (*nirikh*). The

⁴⁹⁷ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.175.

⁴⁹⁸ The Sonthali deputation after visiting Assam noted that 'the manner and customs of our Sonthals have been altogether spoilt'. This was due to the fact their kinsmen were found to have married their daughters with other castes. Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos 1-4, NAI.

⁴⁹⁹ The presence of markets was much differentiated across the geographical space in the two valleys. A commissioner in charge of a tea district in Assam valley observed in the late 1880s that weekly *haats* were mostly situated in central places, and served a group of gardens, and usually held on Sundays. The 1906 Report specifically citing the case of Surma Valley plantations (Sylhet in particular) noted that '...besides the public markets nearly every tea garden has its weekly or bi-weekly *hat*, to which crowds of villagers and tea garden *coolies* may be streaming either to make purchases ...or goods for sale'. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890); *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p.144.

payment for work over and above this amounted to what was the overtime (*ticca*).⁵⁰⁰ The task was not determined by a fixed amount of hours put in daily, but by the work characterized as constituting a reasonable day's labour. Such "flexibility" was allowed by the contracts, which stopped enforcing a defined work schedule for tea gardens.⁵⁰¹

The nature, availability and intensity of tasks were contingent on the tea plant cycle and the state and demands of the industry. During the manufacturing season, when the work-process was intensified and the tasks increased, the *coolies* were hard-pressed for time. In contrast, during winters a sharp drop in employment meant a general decline in earning.⁵⁰² These seasonal variations were mentioned in several provincial labour reports. It was noted that the remuneration during the manufacturing season could be as much as 'two or three times the contract rates', but most other times the *coolies* 'never earns their contract wage'.⁵⁰³

A local District Commissioner, in order to get a general sense of such variations, issued a circular addressed to the managers to submit their schedule of tasks. The "knowledge" of the prevailing rates was not very enlightening as 'in one part of a garden hoeing was heavier than another part. In some weathers it was easier than in other weathers, and so on. Plucking was heavier in a weak than in a full flush'.⁵⁰⁴ Another district commissioner in a similar zeal to get this logic ended up suggesting that 'it is a perfect waste of time to make managers put up a schedule of task. On a large garden the tasks vary according to season and the quality of *coolie*'.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁰ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.64

⁵⁰¹ See Chapter 2 for details.

⁵⁰² The managers often "encouraged" the laid off workforce to go back "home" to 'recruit' during this period as *sardars*. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.204.

⁵⁰³ Again a commissioner of a tea district (Darrang) observed that the minimum wages for men (Rs5) women (Rs.4) and child (Rs.3) were seldom earned except busy the 'tea season'. He further expressed his reservations regarding these earnings being sufficient. *Assam Labour Report, 1879; Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.94.

⁵⁰⁴ Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet, *Assam Labour Report* 1882, p.36.

⁵⁰⁵ Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, *Assam Labour Report* 1883, p.6.

A comparison of the rates of field tasks from four tea gardens of a single district in Assam valley reveals a variation in rates and also considerable differentiation in the nature of tasks.

Work	Garden 1 Dijoo (78 acres under tea)	Garden 2 Lilabari (280 acres under tea)	Garden 3 Hulmari (342 acres under tea)	Garden 4 Silanibari (350 acres under tea)
Hoeing (deep)	15 nals	20 nals (men) 15 nals (women)	8, 10, 12 nals According to class of work	---
Hoeing (light)	25-30 nals According to state of ground	30-40 (men) 20-30 (women)	25-40 nals According to conditions	25-40 nals According to conditions
Hoeing (double)	12	15 (men) 10 (women)	---	16-20 nals
Plucking	4-8 seers According to season	6-10 seers According to flush and quality	6-8 seers According to season and flush	3-8 seers According to season and flush
Forking				
Pruning (top)			300 plants	
Pruning (stick)			50 plants	40-80 plants According to style and age of plants

Table 5.1: Field Tasks on Tea gardens in late nineteenth century. ⁵⁰⁶

The modes of assessing work was either by a measuring device (called *nal*) or counting the rows of tea bushes (*gallis*). As planting was not uniform everywhere, the two measurements did not always coincide. Also, these tasks

⁵⁰⁶ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890).

varied according to the nature of the soil, time of the operation, and intensity of work—deep or light.⁵⁰⁷

Plucking tasks measured by weight of the leaves collected was also influenced by the local, seasonal and the method of operation.⁵⁰⁸ The shifting nature of the Assam/Indian tea, competing with the Chinese tea as a “superior” drink in the global tea market, was not just achieved by the application of modern technology and greater mechanisation of production process, but, also, facilitated by the methods of plucking practised in the late nineteenth century plantations. This was plucking the top part of the tea flush—buds with two leaves (fine plucking)—which was supposed to yield a superior quality tea during manufacturing.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁷ Hoeing essentially done by men was carried out five to seven times a year. A deep hoe was usually done once a year. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.65; *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906* in S.D. Punekar and R Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p.151.

⁵⁰⁸ The nature plucking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had significantly improvised from the early tea plantations of East India Company working under the supervision of Bruce and the advice of the “skilled” Chinese. In the 1860, Lees observed that the tea bushes flushed from twenty to thirty times a year and if the leaves were plucked immediately as it tended to harden on the bushes and became unfit for production. A more ‘scientific’ and ‘systematic’ approach to plucking was attempted from 1870s which identified three general variables—the season, the method of plucking and the species of tea bush. But on the same garden, there were other variables to contend with. The flush could have been full or weak, plucking might have to be carried on from behind the flush or by getting in front of it. Distance was also a factor, as planted areas of some gardens were close to the *coolie* lines and tea houses, while in some others it could be as far as a mile. Around the turn of the century plucking usually began in March and April and is continued till the beginning of December. There were six to seven full flushes in a year, but each bush was plucked approximately every ten days. W.N. Lees, *Tea Cultivation, cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: a review* (Calcutta, 1863) p.369; T.G. Stoker, *Notes on the Management of Tea Plant* (Calcutta, 1874) pp 6-12; J.C. Kydd, *The Tea Industry* (London, 1921) pp.17-10; P Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) pp.484-485; H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948) pp.99-101; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sibsagar* (Allahabad, 1906) p.149; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet* (Allahabad, 1906) p.141.

⁵⁰⁹ A tea planter from Darjeeling mentioned a similar change where the practice of plucking three or sometimes more leaves shifted to two leaves and a bud method and sometimes just one leaf and the bud. Antrobus citing an Annual meeting of Assam Company (1902) described ‘fine plucking’ as plucking of two leaves and a bud taken at seven days old, and the coarser plucking was ten to twelve days old leaf, taking the third leaf when available. A.J. Wallis-Tayler, *Tea Machinery and Tea Factories* (London, 1900) p.33; J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910) p.24; Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p.190.

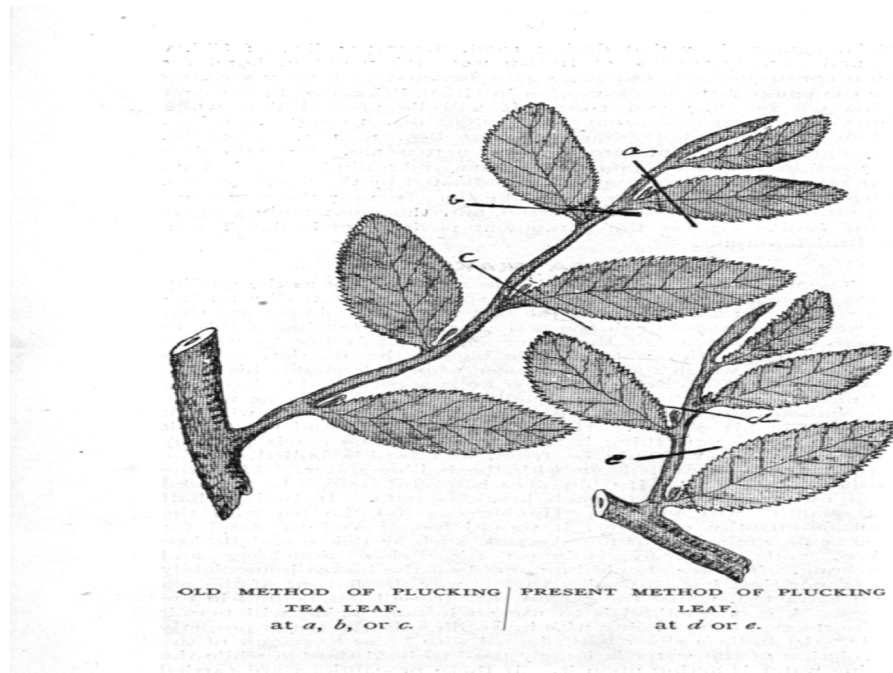


Figure 5.7: Old and New Methods of Plucking⁵¹⁰

This shift had a bearing on the plucking abilities of workers as observed by a tea manager in the 1890s:

Under the old regime, when coarse plucking was universally practised, an industrious woman has been known to bring in over a maund (80 pounds) of leaf in a day; but she can rarely manage to pluck a third of that amount with strict “two and a bud.”⁵¹¹

Such a change is suggested in the language handbook where the planter coaxing the workers to ‘pluck with both hands’ (to intensify the work process) made it very apparent that they had to concentrate on ‘plucking two leaves and one bud’.⁵¹² This distinction (coarse or fine) was often rigorously enforced. This was narrated by an assistant who said that the manager ‘would occasionally search the baskets (of the pluckers) and added to the threats of what would happen to a woman and her forbears if she plucked an extra leaf’.⁵¹³ Such practices of ‘plucking surveillance’ have become a recurrent theme in *Jhumur* songs. In one of the songs, the worker is sternly instructed to

⁵¹⁰ J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910) p.14.

⁵¹¹ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.58.

⁵¹² *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p.45.

⁵¹³ W M Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

pluck *Ekti koli duiti paat* (one bud and two leaves) in order to earn her *bhaat* (rice/food).⁵¹⁴

The rigorous demands for precision and accuracy stood in stark contrast to the claims of “easiness” of plucking and “naturalness” of nimble finger of women. The time required to master these skills was observed by a planter when he suggested that, ‘the difference between an old hand and a beginner was transparent in the quality and quantity of leaf brought to scale’.⁵¹⁵ The value of an “old hand” in plucking was apparent from the experiences of “experimental” plantations as described by Bruce.⁵¹⁶ A sustained yearning for settled workers was, therefore, apparent from the inauguration of tea cultivation and production in Assam. As this was becoming more feasible in this period, one could argue that it not only addressed the chronic “shortages” of labour, but also allowed the acquisition of specialised skills—to attain the different tasks with greater efficiency.

Again, the variation and lack of regularity in the amount of work constituting a “reasonable” rate led to different customs (*dustoor*) in a particular garden constituting the schedule (for the different tasks) at any one time.⁵¹⁷ Such rates were often excessive and tough to accomplish, as narrated by some returnees.⁵¹⁸ On certain occasions, some planters on finding that the cultivation was falling into arrears would even reduce the task to induce the *coolies* to earn a double *hazira*.⁵¹⁹ The “flexibility” to define tasks could not

⁵¹⁴ Kali Dasgupta, *Folk Songs of Bengal and Assam* (Calcutta, 2003) in <http://kalidasgupta.com/kalied2.html>; P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) pp.193-196.

⁵¹⁵ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.137.

⁵¹⁶ See Chapter 1

⁵¹⁷ A Deputy Commissioner of a tea district (Sylhet) noted the futility of comparison of tasks of different gardens. He argued that such a comparison ‘is more of an arbitrary presumption than a genuine searching of truth’. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890).

⁵¹⁸ See Chapter 3.

⁵¹⁹ The District Commissioner of Kamrup observed that the planters would sometimes reduce the task from say thirty *nals* to twenty *nals* to encourage the *coolies* to earn double *hazira* by hoeing 40 *nals*. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) pp.217-226.

always inscribe the will of the manager/work supervisor. At times, these unilateral moves were resisted by the solidarities forged in the context of life and work and the urgent contingencies emanating from these shared anxieties.

For instance, on the increase in the pruning task (25 *nals* to 30 *nals*) in Kharjan tea estate (Lakhimpur, 1901), all the *coolies* refused to recognize the change and kept working according to the older rates (25 *nals*). The manager summoned the *coolies* to his bungalow and enquired a man, Gulali, whether he had accomplished his task. Gulali replied in an affirmative according to the *dustoor*. This was immediately contradicted by the field overseer (*muharrir*). The manager then slapped Gulali, on which the assembled *coolies* attacked him with sticks. The manager took refuge inside his bungalow, where he was held up with his assistants for nearly two hours.⁵²⁰ After a “unilateral” augmentation of the hoeing task in Bangaon garden (Darrang, 1903), the *coolies* reluctantly carried on under the new rates for few days but eventually struck work. When the native assistants tried to get them back to work, the workers refused to submit. Later they assembled outside the manager’s office with hoes in hand, addressing their complaints to the manager.⁵²¹ The workers of Puthiacherra (Sylhet, 1902) struck work when the hoeing task of the garden was augmented. Later, they assaulted a sardar for compelling them to get back to work.⁵²² A general refusal to work due to the tasks being “excessive” occurred on the Sessa tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1901). Around sixty *coolies* left the garden and appeared before the district commissioner to complain about their tasks.⁵²³

The increase in tasks was often used as a “strategy” to discipline the workers for delays, absences and work deemed as “bad” or “short”. At times, not just the degree of tasks, but its nature was altered to discipline the “erring” *coolies*. For instance, when the women workers of Sapataki garden (Sibsagar, 1892) arrived late for plucking one afternoon, their *sardars* were ordered (by the

⁵²⁰ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵²¹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵²² Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵²³ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

manager) to put them to hoeing—a more physically punishing work. The manager was attacked and left unconscious.⁵²⁴ Again, when fines were inflicted by the manager of Mozemga garden (Sibsagar, 1879) on some women as a punishment for “short-work”, he was severely assaulted by them.⁵²⁵ A textbook on tea management advised the managers in such circumstances ‘to not fine the whole lot as they have a common cause of resentment’, but rather to ‘select the worst of them and fine them a lot’.⁵²⁶

The assessment of an individual’s task was ‘theoretically’ open to the ‘interpretations’ of the supervising authorities regulating and registering the work.⁵²⁷ Contesting this view that ‘the subordinate staff has as a general too much power in this respect (in the measurement of work)’. A colonial report emphatically asserted that ‘there was no ground for supposing that measurements generally are not supervised by the managers’. Gardens, as it went on to depict, ‘are marked in blocks, and the manager knows exactly and the *coolies* too have a fair idea of how many are required for a particular task’.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁴ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵²⁵ Annual Report of Police Administration of Assam, 1879, p.23

⁵²⁶ C Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1922) p.319

⁵²⁷ In case of Chinese *coolies* in Cuba the law demanded that they completed five “tasks” a week. In most instances, the “task” was determined by the overseer, who could arbitrarily declare any work as unsatisfactory and withhold wages. This became one of the most frequent complaints of labourers. Again in the plantations of Fiji, the guideline supposedly defining tasks was work which an average, able-bodied male worker could complete in six hours steady work. The definition and allotment of tasks in the field was however left to discretion of the overseer who was ‘to all intents and purposes the sole judge of the fair limits of the task work.’ A.J. Meagher, *Coolie trade: The traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America* (Philadelphia, 2008) p.255; K. Saunders, *Indentured labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920*, p.133; Shaista Shameen, ‘Migration, Labour and Plantation Labour in Fiji’ in S. Jain and R.Reddock, *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p.55; D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p.4.

⁵²⁸ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p.164.

This is the Morning Paper.					
<i>Work to be done on</i>					187 .
Detail	No. of Garden	In whose charge	Headman on the Work	Probable number	Actual number
Total Coolies					.

Figure 5.8: Morning Paper of Manager ⁵²⁹

This was very much in line with a growing sentiment towards “scientific management” of plantations, where every aspect of plantation life and work process was attempted to be carefully defined to obtain maximum efficiency through documentation, control and intensification. The limits of such strategies becomes evident in everyday practices.

The next couple of photographs depict the operation of daily field work carried (early 20th century).

⁵²⁹ E Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of tea* (London, 1883) p.153.



Figure 5.9: Plucking Tea Leaves.⁵³⁰

⁵³⁰ Assamese Women in Costume, Picking Tea Leaves. NAA INV 04423401, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 5.10: Hoeing the Field⁵³¹

The images of plucking work being conducted by women and hoeing task done by the men reveals the dominating presence of supervisors (*sardar* and *muharrir*) organising, controlling and verifying the work. In the first image, the *sardar* (at the back with a turban) was directing a group of female pluckers working on a few designated rows (*gallis*) of the tea bushes. In the second image, the overseers (with *kurta* or shirt) were supervising and recording the male *coolies* hoeing along certain rows of the bushes.

Supervision at the workplace operated through varying layers of control with diverse and overlapping functions in the conduct of work. The work supervisor, or *Sardars*, were placed over batches (*Chillan*) of men or women and apparently received general directions from the manager regarding the

⁵³¹ J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910).

work to be achieved on a daily basis.⁵³² They were accountable for their batch turning out for work at the designated hour, and also the attainment of a quantity of work by them.⁵³³ The ‘sardar’s mode of management’, as a planter portrayed, ‘was to parade up and down between the rows of the bushes, armed with a small stick and the dignity that his position of authority gave him’ and where he constantly ‘incited them (*coolies*) to make haste and get along faster (Che lao! Che lao!)’.⁵³⁴

The authority of *sardar*, contrary to many allusions in the planter narratives, was not necessarily derived, but was also constituted and reconstituted by their location in the work hierarchy and social life on the tea gardens.⁵³⁵ Some *sardars* were the recruiters (recruiting sardar), who managed to persuade and bring a fairly large number of people with them. While others were older “respected” men of the garden and even the nearby *bastis*. A manager (H Grant, Ainakhal Tea Garden) from Cachar referred to three “prominent” *sardars* on his garden to the 1906 Labour Commission. This gives a sense of the broad variation of this category. One of them, named Manniram Das, was a native of Sylhet and owned property close to the garden. He controlled over two hundred *coolies* of the garden for which he received one *anna* per *rupee* worth of work executed (twenty five percent of the wages). The other *sardar*, Ismail, was born on the garden, while the third, Ramsha Kurmi (a native from

⁵³² The necessity of overseers was immediately realised by the colonial government with the arrival of Chinese workers in Cuba, and the emerging “labour difficulties”. They recommended the planters to appoint overseers to ‘guide, watch over, and assist the labourers in their work.’ A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade: The traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America, 1847-1874* (Philadelphia, 2008) p.208.

⁵³³ W M Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁵³⁴ The intensity of the work that the *Sardar* demanded (Come on! Come on) had interesting parallels with the *Jhumur* song *Sardar Bole Kaam Kaam* (Sardar says Work! Work). G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp.135-136. For such practices in contemporary tea plantations in North Bengal P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) p.201.

⁵³⁵ In the case of Surinam plantations, the equivalent of Sardar called *Mandur* was seen as an crucial link in the chain of command as they could speak in the native language. But the ‘threat’ of demotion, as Hoefté argues, kept them on the side of the employers. Shobita Jains’ study of the contemporary Assam plantation shows a degree of mutuality existing between the sardars and their gangs. R. Hoefté, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville, 1998) p.23; S. Jain, ‘Gender Relations and the Plantation System in Assam’, in S. Jain and R. Reddock, *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p.55.

Azamgarh), had worked on the plantation for more than thirty years. They commanded over fifty *coolies* individually and received the wages of the workers. These *sardars* shared social and work ties with their gang, which were articulating in extremely complex ways.⁵³⁶

When a *sardar* was severely abused by the manager of Talap tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1898) for taking a ‘break’ during work and chatting with other *sardars*, the *coolies* attacked the manager and his three assistants. Two years later, on the same garden, a riot occurred under fairly comparable circumstances. The Assistant manager (Jameson) while “disciplining” the *coolies* for the way work was being conducted ‘took hold of the *sardar* and ran him up to the place where the plucking was to begin’. He was attacked with sticks.⁵³⁷ The incident which transpired in Barjuli garden (1891, Darrang), where the manager forced the *coolies* to turn out for work on a day after a festival, started when a *sardar*, representing the worker’s case, was assaulted by the manager.⁵³⁸

These incidents, signifying the ties of deference and mutuality of interests between the *sardars* and *coolies*, has also to be appreciated in the background of several other incidents where the *sardar* becomes the target, as an exemplar of perverse and coercive authority.

Apart from their role in supervising field work, the *sardars* also assisted in the measurement of the individual’s task which was documented by the *mohurir*—the native supervisors—and entered in books.⁵³⁹ Later, they were supposed to appear before the manager to give an account of the day’s work, complain

⁵³⁶ Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) pp.148-149.

⁵³⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵³⁸ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵³⁹ Crole makes a case for a “chain of hierarchy” in place during field work. The sardars were said to be supervised by *mohurir* and who in turn was under a head or *burra muharrir*—who was answerable to the manager for the whole conduct of the work. D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.8.

against any defaulters, and receive the instructions for the subsequent day's work.⁵⁴⁰



Figure 5.11: Native Supervisors.⁵⁴¹

The relentless goading of managers, overseers and *sardars* to drive the workers hard on the fields, as the following phrases from a language handbook suggested, was not always effective.⁵⁴²

Why have you not finished your work? Others can finish, why cannot you?

The quicker you pluck the more the pice you will make

Make the hoe deeper

You must finish it. Else you would be short paid.

The extremely strenuous deep hoeing, mentioned a manager, was the occasion for the '*coolies* to shirk and get better of his employer'. He found this impossible to check because by 'dexterous manipulation the *coolie* cuts the top

⁵⁴⁰ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p.81.

⁵⁴¹ *Assamese Tea Overseers and Writers in Costume Outside Wood-Slat Building*. NAA INV 04423600, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁴² *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) pp.44-48.

earth in such a way to present the appearance of a good deep cut'.⁵⁴³ Such shirking was interpreted by another manager as a 'trick is to make the manager think that he has given a wrong order and give them easier work in consequence'.⁵⁴⁴

The quality and the quantity of individual's work was recorded in the 'books'—(Figure 5.12) which was becoming a stable feature in the task assessment practices of the late nineteenth century tea gardens.⁵⁴⁵ The sense of empowerment of the *mohurir*, as suggested in the figure (5.12), was not just his clothes, umbrella, stick but also the pen and book.

DATE.	Names of Sardars and Duffdars.	No. to go to work under each Sirdar.	Sex.	What Countryman.	RATE OF TASKS.		IN WHAT GARDENS.		DESCRIPTION OF WORK TO BE DONE.	No. gone to work under each Sirdar.	No. of Hagiras sent.	AMOUNT OF WORK DONE.			No. on Sick Leave.	No. on Leave of Absence.	No. absent without Leave.	Total No. of Work from all Causes.	Manager's Signature.
					Hazira.	Ticca.	Old.	New.				Hazira.	Ticca.	TOTAL.					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1.5.'86.	Gonga	30	M.	B.	Nla. 30	Nla. 15	1	0	Hoe, Pts.	29	29	1 0 2 10	0 0 2 10	1 1 0 0	1	1	R. D.
"	Goness	42	"	"	"	"	1	0	"	41	41	3 0 1 10	1 0 0 15	4 0 2 5	..	1	..	1	R. D.
"	Komta	45	"	K.	"	"	0	2	"	41	41	3 0 1 10	1 0 0 15	4 0 2 15	2	2	..	4	R. D.
		117								111	111	7 1 0 10	2 0 4 0	9 1 4 10	3	3	..	6	R. D.
"	Champa	35	W.	B.	Srs. 8	..	3	0	{ Pluck Leaf, Mds. }	33	33	4 24 0 0	1 16 0 0	6 0 0 0	2	2	R. D.
"	Hira	28	Crn.	"	Srs. 10	..	4, 5	0	{ Collect Slugs, Mds. }	24	21	5 10 0 0	0 4 0 0	5 14 0 0	3	1	..	4	R. D.

Figure 5.12: Garden Book: Daily *Kamjari* Book⁵⁴⁶

There were instances of discrepancies and corrupt practices in assessment (by *sardars*) and recording (by *mohurir*), leading to serious anxieties among the field workers.⁵⁴⁷ Even the work in the tea-house/factory was marked by the

⁵⁴³ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884, Calcutta) pp.81-82.

⁵⁴⁴ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p.13.

⁵⁴⁵ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p.44, p.46.

⁵⁴⁶ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886)

⁵⁴⁷ Chakrabarty argues that such 'falsification of documents' was integral to the operation of power and authority that the sardar wielded over the *coolie*. A contemporary observer alluding to the fact that 'coolies are often cheated out of a portion of their wages' suggested that to prevent this fraud the 'planters often oblige the *muharrir* to pay in their presence, or what is better, pay them personally.' D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton, 1989) p.108; S Ward, *A Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p.125.

presence of work supervisors (as in the next two photographs) evaluating and recording the work.

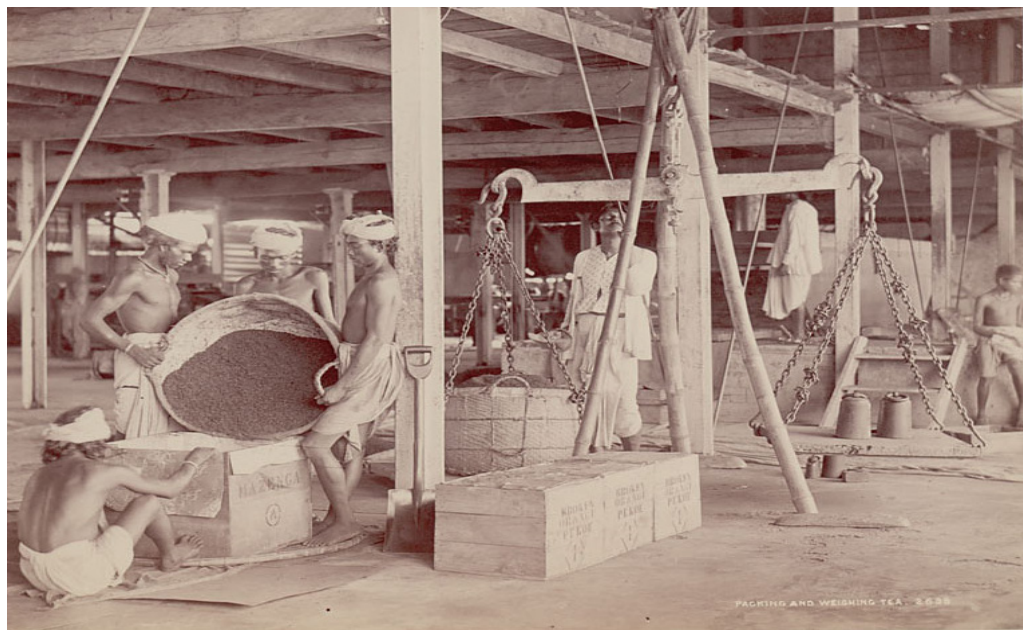


Figure 5.13 and 5.14: Working in Tea Factory.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁸ *Assamese women sorting tea n.d* and *Assamese men packing and weighing tea n.d*. NAA INV 04423202 and NAA INV 04424002, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

There was a feeling that the books kept in the local vernacular (Assamese and sometimes Bengali) meant that the ‘imported labourers (as well as the managers) were pretty much in the hands of *mohurir* who writes these accounts’.⁵⁴⁹ Absences marked in books were not always intentional and often used as a means of fining work deemed as short or bad. Some other practices of not keeping a ‘record’, but merely giving the workers a token with a value ‘commensurate’ with the portion of the task achieved.⁵⁵⁰ The dimension of the tokens from Mertinga tea garden (Sylhet, 1896) varied according to the fraction of the task concluded.⁵⁵¹ This was also seen as an effective tactic to discourage ‘absenteeism’, as the tokens were collected at the *ghunti* (muster) the day after. A manager (Sylhet, 1902) permitted an ‘established’ garden *chowkidar* (who also owned a shop in the garden) to cash these tokens. He took a percent commission for his “services” and *coolies* often ended up surrendering the tokens earned during the course of the month, just in exchange for food. A riot was reported from this garden with the *coolies* complaining that their wages were low.

⁵⁴⁹ Major Graham (Deputy Commissioner, Darrang) *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p.81.

⁵⁵⁰ This practice was reported by the Commissioner of a tea district in the late 1870s. The official efforts to conduct an enquiry in to causes of mortality on a garden in Cachar were hampered because of the absence of any books showing the earnings of each *worker* separately. The system on this garden (followed by other gardens of the area) was to pay in “tokens”, which were cashed on a weekly or monthly basis. These token did not always have a cash value, but sometimes merely mentioned the quality of tasks achieved—half *haziri*, quarter *haziri*. Das in his study of plantation labour noted that daily payment made by brass tokens which were not only cashed by the gardens management but sometimes commissioned to a shop. The 1906 Commission found this as a general practice in the district of Sylhet. *Assam Labour Report*, 1880, p.5; *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p.137, pp.139-140. R.K. Das, *Plantation Labour in India* (Calcutta, 1931) p.143.

⁵⁵¹ These brass tokens are from a private collection. The first image illustrates distinct tokens used by the gardens belonging to different tea companies—mostly in Sylhet. For details see <http://www.koi-hai.com>



Figure 5.15: Garden Token. ⁵⁵²

The pervasiveness of grievances against such ‘excesses’ is borne out by a ‘practical treatise’ on the ‘management of Assam tea gardens’ where the author observed that the ‘coolies are continually complaining that their sirdar is cheating them’. He strongly recommended his readers (young tea planters) that ‘though a manager should never take a *coolie*’s part against his sirdar...but he would not be acting fairly to let such a complaint pass unexamined into’. He went on to propose a ‘way out of the difficulty’:

Bring the coolie and his sirdar face to face. Say to the coolie. “Now, then, you say this sirdar has cheated you out of some land? Answer, “Yes.” “All right, then! I shall measure your land myself; and if you are wrong, you forfeit your day’s *hazira*, for complaining unjustly of your superior. If you are right, then I shall punish your sirdar...Most likely one of them will give in.” ⁵⁵³

Notwithstanding the effectiveness of such a strategy, there were instances when the workers could not be so easily placated. Workers of Rema garden (Sylhet, 1898) refused to join work because their previous day’s tasks were arbitrarily deemed as ‘short’, without the overseers actually measuring it on the excuse of persistent rains.⁵⁵⁴ On being paid short wages, the workers of Khobang tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1892) assaulted the overseers who were perceived as the “reason” for the faulty assessment of their tasks.⁵⁵⁵ There was

⁵⁵² H L Thomas, Sub Divisional Officer, South Sylhet to Deputy Commissioner Sylhet, 23rd January 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904. ASA.

⁵⁵³ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters’ Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p.41.

⁵⁵⁴ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁵⁵ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

a strike in Amrailcherra tea garden (Sylhet, 1902) and workers declined to get back to work because they had issues with the overseers for habitually making under assessments. On being physically coerced by the manager to comply, they assaulted him.⁵⁵⁶

There were complaints made by workers of Balipara tea garden (Sylhet, 1890) for being paid less than what they felt they had actually earned during the month. When the manager tried to arbitrate, he was assaulted.⁵⁵⁷ The intervention of a manager of Kalacherra (Cachar, 1892) to “protect” the garden *babu* from being assaulted by workers for an existing objection was resented. A large group followed the manager on his way back to the bungalow. He was later stopped and assaulted.⁵⁵⁸ Again, when the management of Mirtinga tea garden (Sylhet, 1903) stopped the pay of some individuals on account of bad work, they collected in front of the garden office and vented their concerns.⁵⁵⁹ The “disquiet” that took place on the pay day on Hukanpukri garden (Lakhimpur, 1900), which led to a group of three hundred workers combining against the manager, started with an individual complaining about the faulty assessment of their overtime work.⁵⁶⁰

Such anxieties were not limited to the field. In a case reported from the tea-house of Joboka garden (Sibsagar, 1902), the “factory workers” assembled as they were seriously aggrieved about their overtime assessment. When the manager attempted to ‘disarm’ them, he was challenged and severely beaten along with his assistant.⁵⁶¹

The practices of assessment on the fields for plucking, accomplished by the women workers, had to undergo another stage of assessment: the verification and weighing of the leaves plucked.

⁵⁵⁶ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁵⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁵⁸ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁵⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁶⁰ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁶¹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

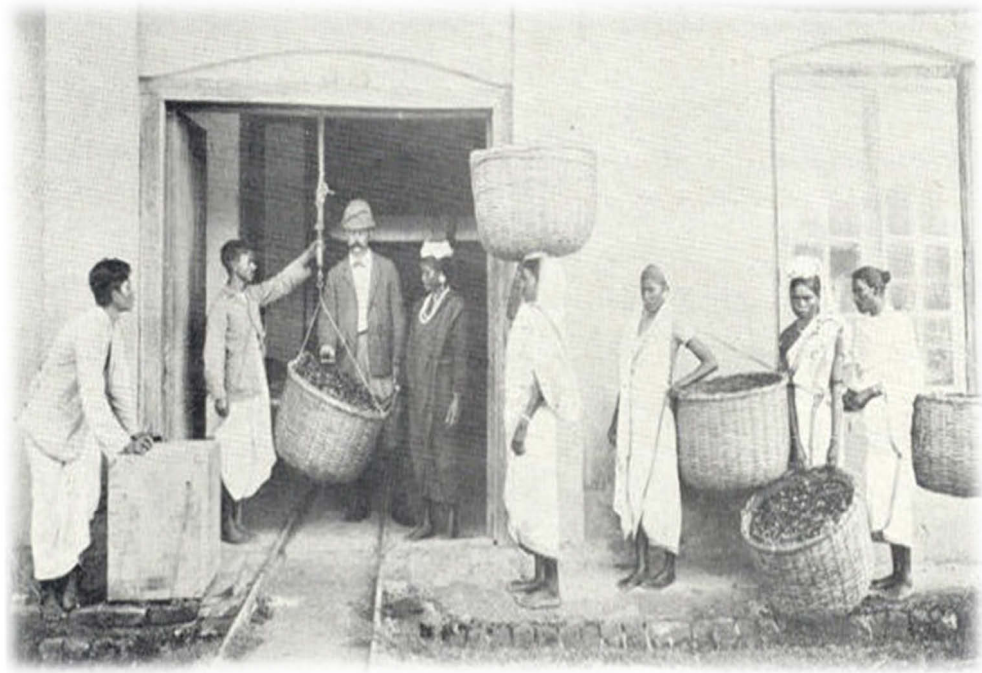


Fig. 5.16: Weighing leaves in presence of Manager

The photograph (Fig 5.17) from Jorehaut tea company garden was of a 'weighing booth' for plucked leaves brought by the female *coolies*.⁵⁶² The European manager was assessing the quality of the leaves (fine or coarse), while one of the native assistant weighed it and the other kept a record of the weight in the books. The weighing scene was detailed by a tea manager from another garden:

There were three weighing booths (for plucked leaves)...The head babu wrote up the hazris (attendance), and we (European manager/assistants) searched each basket before it was put on the scale. When a fault in leaf was found...the woman with her basket was turned out of the line into a large pen alongside...by the time the weighing was finished there would be forty or fifty women waiting...clearing out the offending shoots from their baskets.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶² W.A.B. Nicholetts, served in the Jorehaut Tea Company from 1898-1937 and this photograph is taken from one of the tea gardens around 1905-1910. H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd.* (London, 1948).

⁵⁶³ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

These practices of ‘disciplining’ for the quality of leaves plucked and other suspicions of cheating during weighing also figures prominently in the language handbook.⁵⁶⁴

What is the brick doing in your basket? You are trying to get extra weight.

Your leaf is hot and red.

Your leaf is very coarse.

You must pick out the coarse leaves before I can weigh it.

The claims of authority and complete control of the European managers and assistants was exaggerated, as the *sardars* and *mohurir* were also relevant in conducting the operation (Figure 5.17).



Figure 5.17: Weighing Leaves in the absence of manager⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ *Tea Districts Labour Association Language Handbook, Santhali* (Calcutta, 1929) pp.40-41. For a similar practice in Ceylon see *Cooly Tamil, as understood by Labourers on Tea and Rubber estates* (Colombo, 1915) pp.50-52.

⁵⁶⁵ *Assamese Women in Costume, Bringing Baskets of Tea Leaves to Be Weighed* n.d. NAA INV 04423402, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Durapati (Khawang garden, Lakhimpur, 1914) was subject to a similar probing and disciplining and later denied payment on account of the “poor” quality of leaves she had plucked. The assembled workers assaulted and confined the manager in his office.

The discrepancy in the timing and non-payment of wages was also a potent tactic to “bind” the *coolies*, compel them into debt and, at times, discipline the “offenders”. Such practices of labour control were employed on the Assam Company plantations in the late 1840s. This stimulated serious disturbances and contributed to the ‘militant’ image of the Kacharis—who consistently and collectively thwarted these moves.⁵⁶⁶ These practices apparently persevered in the changed milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century plantations. Even after the establishment of ‘occasions’ like the pay-day and ‘protective’ claims of the contracts for legislating a ‘minimum wage’—which was rarely enforced.

On the non-payment of wages on the customary pay-day, the workers of Scottpur garden (Cachar, 1896) declined to work. Again, when the wages were not paid to the workers of the Rema tea estate (Sylhet, 1898), they refused to join work. On the use of physical intimidation by the manager to comply, the *coolies* made a collective assault on him. They were later ordered to the muster ground where they again attacked the manager, and struck him several blows with sticks and stones.

A clear purpose in the modification of pay day was manifest in a case reported from Powai tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1917), which was briefly noted earlier. On a particular Monday, the assistant manager (Grant) of this garden arrived at his office to pay the workers their weekly earnings. The assembled group seemed to be in agitated mood and Grant sensing danger made a rush for his bungalow, but was struck several times on the way. The workers later ransacked the office premises. The following morning, despite the presence of police in the garden, about five hundred workers came out in a “festive” mood with sticks, knives and drums and marched round the lines in procession. Later they wrecked the local trader’s (*kaya*) shop. The investigations into the incident revealed that

⁵⁶⁶ See Chapter 1.

there was general discontentment on account of the garden authorities changing the pay day from Saturdays to Mondays. The workers did not have ready cash for the weekly Sunday market which forced them to take loans from the local *kaya* (trader), whose prices they considered extortionate. There were simultaneous attacks on the symbols representing the garden authorities and the local trader. It was out of the apprehension that there was a collusion between the two parties and the change in the *dustoor* of payment was made to benefit the traders.⁵⁶⁷

5.8 Notions of Honour

A strike was reported in Alinagar garden (Sylhet, 1900). When the assistant manager went to make enquiries, he was assaulted. A curious remark was made in the official report on the incident. It read as follows: ‘the case appears to have originated in some violence on the part of the assistant manager of the estate, who as the accused said took their *izzat* from them’. What was this *izzat* that the workers of Alinagar claimed was being taken from them? *Izzat*, or honour, has been variously argued to have been reposed in women—who were being potentially threatened in these circumstances.⁵⁶⁸

The role and presence of women, as has been argued earlier, was central to the work process of plantations, since its very inception. An early interest in migrant workers was also premised on the perceived necessity of women (and even children) for plucking work, which was not being “satisfactorily” rendered by the local Assamese society. The early contract Acts (1863) specified a percentage of females (15%) in each batch being transported to Assam. The entrenchment and spread of a specialising work process from late 1870s, with a more precise definition of different “jobs” on a plantation (often organised along lines of gender and age), was also a strong reason for the

⁵⁶⁷ Again when the prices demanded by the traders were found to be unjustifiably high, there were cases of *hat* looting in Bindukhuri and Balipara gardens (Darrang, 1901). *Letter from JC Webster, Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India dated 23rd April 1917*. Home Department, Police Branch, June 1917, 115, NAI. R. Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 26th 1985) p.21.

⁵⁶⁸ For a discourse of *izzat* in the contemporary plantations. See P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) p.160.

continued reliance on contactors, who could redress any gender imbalance on tea gardens. The competence of contractors in “delivering to order” could potentially fulfil such gendered requirements. There was also a strong predilection to perceive women as “settling” the workforce. The contractors frequently forged such conjugal unions in depots (depot marriage) and, thereby, offering to tea gardens happy couples, who were more likely stay.

The patriarchal authority of managers also claimed to “influence” matrimonial alliances on the plantations, reaffirming their clout and hold on the workers.⁵⁶⁹

A planter handbook clearly makes that allusion:

Manager: Could you not marry your son/daughter to a girl/boy on this garden?

Manager: Longa's daughter/son will not make a good wife/husband to your son/daughter. She is a lazy girl/boy

Manager: I agree to let your son/daughter marry the person you have selected.⁵⁷⁰

The power to frame matrimonial unions merely to ‘suit the interests of the industry’ and enforce the ‘will of the planters’ could not render it as completely notional. A planter suggested that ‘the relations between husband and wife, I think, will bear comparison with those existing amongst our peasantry. The relations between parents and children are even closer and fonder’. The colonial state appeared to uphold the sanctity of marriage. The 1893 amendment to the Assam contract made the provision that the contracts of husband and wife should be synchronised. But the patriarchal intents of the colonial law was made explicit in the 1901 Act which deemed that “single woman” could not travel to Assam without the consent of a lawful guardian (husband/father).

The differentiation of wages and deskilling of woman's work in the plantation reaffirmed the roles of men as the “breadwinner”—where women of family/community needed care and protection. But in conjunction to the production of family and its associated norms of honour and protection, there were the stereotypes of the promiscuous *coolie*-woman and the rampant

⁵⁶⁹ R.P. Behal, ‘Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule’ in R. Behal & M van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi) p.162.

⁵⁷⁰ *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927).

practices of managers keeping female *coolies* as mistresses and concubines.⁵⁷¹ In addition, instances of sexual abuse on the 'isolated' enclaves were not infrequent. The manager of Kacharigaon (Darrang, 1902), assaulted two *coolies*, which according to the official report, 'had improper intimacy with a girl, who was kept by the manager as his mistress'. A *coolie* girl from Maduri garden (Sibsagar, 1892) was confined and assaulted by the manager when she snubbed his overtures. This lurking threat of the abuse of the woman was articulated in the anxieties over *izzat*.

When a native assistant manager 'insulted' the women of a garden, the *coolies* caught hold of him, tied him on his pony, and took him through a distance of eleven miles to the bungalow of the superintendent to make complaints.⁵⁷² Again, when the manager of Nadua tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1899) attempted to "outrage" a *coolie* girl, he was assaulted by the workers. There was a "riot" of Rangajan tea garden (Sibsagar, 1899) which was due to the 'ill feeling against the assistant manager in regard to a woman on the garden'.⁵⁷³

The Assistant of Hatikuri tea estate (Cachar, 1913) continued, despite objections, inspecting the leaves plucked by the women *coolies* collected in clothes worn round their waists. He was severely assaulted by the *coolies*. Six of them were charged and arrested for rioting and assault. The legitimacy of the act of assault and the general approval to it was more clearly revealed when an attack was made on the police and the arrested men were released. On further enquiries of the incident it was found that the *coolies* were gravely dissatisfied with this mode of examination of leaves and had made several complaints to the head *babu* of the garden.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ In a book on European in India a section on the planter mentions that 'you occasionally come across a bachelor Planter whose views on a certain form of mortality are somewhat lax. This is he who fits himself with a partner of his loneliness, generally a daughter of the soil.' A Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977) p.45; H. Hervey, *The European in India* (London, 1913) p.53

⁵⁷² *Assam Labour Report* 1884, p.4.

⁵⁷³ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

⁵⁷⁴ Letter from WJ Reid to Secretary to Government of India. Home Department, Police Branch, No 67, Part B, July 1914. NAI.

In a case reported from Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905), one can more clearly notice the dynamics of how a “small” act of disciplining of a *coolie* girl could provoke communal anxieties of honour being threatened and snowball into a general grievance. The manager of the garden in question (Mangin), on his daily inspection of the pruning tasks, took a *coolie* girl (Durgi) by her ear to a place where he felt that she should have been working. Around five men working in the vicinity immediately came rushing up to him, and one among them (Gambhir) in a very agitated mood questioned the manager— “*Ki katri maike marile?*” (Why did you beat up the girl?). Soon, around thirty other field workers approached the scene and assaulted the manager with their clods and sticks. The fleeing manager was chased and held hostage in his bungalow by a group which had grown to around one hundred and fifty. Later in the day, the Koliapani workers—men and women numbering around two hundred—marched for Jorhat (the subdivisional headquarters), and lodged a complaint to the Deputy Commissioner that the *sahib* had threatened their *izzat*.⁵⁷⁵

5.9 Violence as Protest, Protest as Violence

A degree of violence, as we have noticed in our cases, is a recurring facet of protest action of plantation workers. Apart from physical attack, appliances used in plantation work like hoes, *kodalis*, sticks and *daos* became weapons at these moments of conflict. It needs to be restated that physical disciplining was a vital element in the perpetuation of planter authority as they had “arrogated” to themselves the right to private discipline. A shift from practices of systematic and excessive use of violence, rampant in the “unsettled” plantations of 1860s, did not imply that violent disciplining was purged. It was more in the lines of what Merry suggests in the context of colonial Hawaii ‘that the (planters’) image of paternal power enabled violence to be thought as discipline, justifying the use of flogging and whips on the plantations’. But as she goes to point that there were ‘forms of violence that were thought to be

⁵⁷⁵ Case 22 G.R. of 1905, PC Mangin versus Tulsi Kairi, Kamal Kairi, Ramcharan Ganju, Arjun Goala, Bhandari Ganju, Jagua Bhumiz, Lachman Muchi, Sibchoran.; Sections 147, 148 IPC, Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 105-107, Part B, July 1905. NAI

excessive just as paternal authority in the home required violence to establish and maintain discipline, but not excessive violence'.⁵⁷⁶

Such a tendency comes to the fore in the cases of assault on individuals, which at times were deemed disproportionate and met with organised opposition. A *coolie* in the Apin tea garden (Cachar, 1895) was ordered by the manager to bring back certain individuals who had absconded. While returning back to the garden, two of the apprehended *coolies* escaped. He was severely disciplined by the manager, who beat him up with a stick. Later in the day when the manager was making the rounds of the garden, the *coolies* expressed their dissent. One worker caught hold of the bridle of his pony and others threatened him with *kodalis* (hoes). On the public caning of a worker from Bokel tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1893), the *coolies* attacked the manager on whose orders such an act was carried out. An aggravated assault with hoes was committed by a number of *coolies* of Laskarpur (Sylhet, 1897) on the manager who had given three strokes with a stick to one of the *coolies* in chastisement for assaulting a *sardar*.

Often it was not merely the nature of violence, but the individual targeted which led to it being perceived as “illegitimate”. This becomes evident in the disciplining of Durgi (a young girl who the manager “mildly” took by the ear), which led to assaults and mass withdrawal of workers from the garden.

With regard to the numerous “incidents” of violence of tea gardens, consider three cases which can be detailed at some greater length:

In the first incident, Aghna, a *chaukidar* at the bungalow of Dr. Patherson (Moran tea garden, Lakhimpur, 1902) was brutally whipped by him. This assault caused some disenchantment and ill-feeling in the garden. The colonial investigation report of the incident read:

Dr Patherson of Moran tea estate found fault with a *coolie* named Aghna and slapped him; this enraged him and his relations. Aghna and three other *coolies* brought a

⁵⁷⁶ S.E. Merry, *Colonizing Hawaii: The cultural power of law* (Princeton, 2000) p.140. J. Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the colonial order in Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 1989)

number of *coolies* and formed an unlawful assembly, with the common object of insulting and intimidating Dr. Patherson and Mr. Harroks (the manager).⁵⁷⁷

The “personal” annoyance of Aghna and his relations, which the report suggests, grossly underestimated the antipathy the incident provoked. The “unlawful assembly” consisted of around sixty workers of the garden who pursued the carriage of the manager and doctor, as they were driving home through the coolie lines, using defiant language.

In the next instance, a series of assaults were made on Matadin, a *coolie* of Monai garden (1914) by the manager, assistant manager and their orderlies. The battered and bruised Matadin had to be taken to the “coolie hospital” in fairly critical circumstances. Later, a group of about two hundred workers took the ailing Matadin from the hospital and decided to leave the garden. The manager tried to halt this “exodus” and make the group return by pursuing them on a horseback. One of workers—Ramadin, (possibly a relative of Matadin)—grabbed the manager’s horse by the bridle and forced him to dismount. The manager then drew out his revolver and fired. On this the workers assaulted the manager with sticks till he fell unconscious. The group then broke into two parties, one of which administered a severe thrashing to a Sikh *havildar* (police constable), and the other party went searching for a particular *jamadar* (native staff).⁵⁷⁸

The third incident occurred on 27th July 1901. This subsequently went to court. This allowed two versions of the same episode to appear, which, as we will see, is very instructive. The first account was apparently based on the witnesses of some workers of the garden. It was told that the whole incident started when a worker named Hiroa had requested a *babu* (Rajoni Cant Ghose) leave, as he was feeling unwell. The *babu* refused to accept this request. Shortly afterwards, while Hiroa was working on the field, he again happened to meet the *babu* and repeated his appeal. He was again denied, but in an extremely offensive tone. On this, the brother of Hiroa pushed the *babu*,

⁵⁷⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

⁵⁷⁸ Letter from BC Allen, Offg Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 20th June, 1914. Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 120-22, August 1914. NAI.

wherein two *sardars* quickly rushed to stop him. Later in the day a group of around twelve men struck work, and proceeded to the residential lines announcing that they intend to leave for *Zillah* (district headquarters) to lodge a complaint. One of the members was then despatched to bring the families to join them in their mission. When the news reached the manager (Lyall), he repeatedly sent a garden staff to communicate an order to the striking party to immediately report to him. The party consistently refused to comply. Describing the same episode, the garden doctor claimed that ‘they (the striking workers) accompanied their refusal with threat’. However, the court in its judgement observed that ‘there is not the slightest evidence to support this, and the man who himself went to bring them, does not say so’. Lyall later proceeded to the scene (with the *babu*) to personally stop these workers from leaving. On the refusal of the workers to comply, he ordered a group of coolies (described as old *coolies*) to thrash the striking party.

The manager, in a written statement to the court, had a different story to tell. He claimed that on hearing the news of some workers leaving, he decided to go to their residential quarters to pacify them and was “unexpectedly assaulted” with sticks and knocked down by two men—Nauhu and Sriram. The garden doctor added further detail to this assault. He went to the extent of quoting Lyall, who he claimed to have pleaded the workers approaching to attack him: ‘What has happened? Leave your *lathies* and come to me to see what I shall do’.⁵⁷⁹

These relatively detailed and slightly contesting accounts indicate how the workers anxieties regarding work, discipline and violence, manifesting in myriad ways (including through violence), could very easily have been reduced into “one violent act” in the colonial reporting. The vicious assaults on Matadin did not necessarily lead to counter violence, but workers at first chose to leave the garden with the intent to, perhaps, take Matadin to a better equipped hospital at the district headquarters, or register a complaint with the colonial authorities stationed there. The ensuing action of the manager to

⁵⁷⁹ Emperor vs Lyall And Ors. on 2/12/190. (1902) ILR 29 Cal 128, <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/842423/>.

prevent this group from leaving, by force and fire, led to a string of assaults on him and the garden authorities. Similarly, Hiroa and his fellow workers initially decided to go to the *Zillah* after Hiroa's repeated requests for leave went unheeded. The manager's attempts to "personally" stop them, by possibly supervising a "collective" attack, led to scuffles and severe fights on the garden. These instances remind us about the nature and limits of our "sources" (from the colonial archives), which foregrounds violence as the necessary reason and condition of coolies' "reaction". Such a narrative strategy is particularly employed to empty agency from the worker's actions, where very different motivations and modes of protest are conveniently collapsed into the overarching category of violence and quickly read as "instinctive" and almost "compulsive". Again, this is not to deny the significance of violence in coolie labour protest, but to suggest a degree of scepticism regarding its overrepresentation.

A feature which comes out at these moments of violent conflicts is that the point of attack is not restricted to the manager himself but also other symbolic manifestations of his authority. Here it is useful to see the representation of managerial authority through a contemporary photograph.



Figure 5.18: Tea Manager Bungalow, European Assistants and Native Staff.⁵⁸⁰

The bungalow, the figure of him riding the horse, the other individuals identified with this authority structure (European assistants, native staff and even the colonial policemen) became potential targets during such conflicts.

5.10 A Collective Will to Leave

A very distinctive practice that emerges from our survey is the phenomena of workers withdrawing “collectively” from gardens and presenting themselves before the colonial authorities stationed at the district headquarters. This propensity was confirmed by a colonial commissioner in the early twentieth century when he opined that ‘tea coolies have a pretty clear idea that they are somehow under the special protection of the *sarkar*’, and he went to suggest

⁵⁸⁰ *Tea Managers' Thatch Roof Bungalow in Assam n.d.* NAA INV 04423502, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

that ‘our court records will show that they are ready enough to complain’.⁵⁸¹ This “erroneous idea”, as characterised by another official of the time, ‘has been formed by the *coolies* that in cases against the managers, they have the sympathy of the authorities’.⁵⁸²

These practices can simply be read as “outcomes” of the opportunities made possible by the “protective” contracts. Before the concepts of protector, protection and the “rights to complain” were codified in the 1865 Act, cases can be cited of coolies collectively going up to the district authorities to ventilate their concerns. In the year 1864, a violent punishment meted out by a plantation manager (Schoneman) resulted in the death of a worker named Summon. The subsequent disciplining of some dissenting fellow workers precipitated in a collective act targeting the manager, where he and other members of the management were disarmed and bound up. The coolies then marched on to the district headquarters to lodge a complaint. During the same period (early 1860s), a group of hundred workers from a Cachar tea garden marched up to the district headquarters to complain about the work (*Kodalir kaam* i.e digging work) assigned to them.⁵⁸³

In fact, the “rights of coolies to complain” (encoded in the 1865 Act, and subsequently affected by the 1882 Act) clearly mentioned a “proper procedure” to be followed: the objections made had to be routed through the manager to the District Commissioner/Protector for further action.⁵⁸⁴ This rendered other modes of complaining largely illegal. Apart from the explicit rights of managers to arrest, paradoxically, the coolie’s “rights to complain” criminalised worker’s practices of leaving the gardens for the headquarters to address their urgent, yet, grave concerns. Such “illegality”, as defined by law and contract, failed to erode the “legitimacy” of the right to complain when the manager and management were perceived to have seriously violated the “codes

⁵⁸¹ Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.98-112, January 1904, ASA.

⁵⁸² Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.98-112, January 1904, ASA.

⁵⁸³ See Chapter 2 for details

⁵⁸⁴ See Chapter 2 for details

of conduct". In such cases of breakdown, relief was sought from another authority.

For instance, in an incident called 'Mesaijan affair' (Lakhimpur, 1888), drawing some publicity, a group of *coolies* left the garden and marched up to the district headquarters. The colonial commissioner gives the following account of the case:

A large body of coolies left the garden and came to the station, complaining of ill-treatment. They stated that both men and women had been flogged; in the case of women that they had been tied to a post in the porch of the manager's house, their clothes lifted up to their waists, and that they had been beaten on the bare buttocks with a stirrup leather by the orders of the Assistant manager, Anding. The Deputy Superintendent of Police went out and enquired, and found that two women, Panoo and Khumti, had been assaulted in the way described. I myself went out, and, on further enquiring ascertained that a woman named Sukni had also been beaten some three or four times. The women Panoo and Khumti had been flogged for desertion and Sukni for short work.⁵⁸⁵

The flogging of Khumti, Panoo and Sukni was reminiscent of the Cherajolie incident of the 1860s, where the violence was routinely and systematically employed. A later report on the 'Messiajan affair' revealed that the death rate on this particular garden was around twenty five percent.⁵⁸⁶ An acute shortage of workers made the managers employ violent practices to force work. This incident brutally reminds us that apart from "closer supervision" of workers, violence as a strategy to discipline and force work was not abandoned.⁵⁸⁷ The act of disciplining could not have been but considered extremely unreasonable. It was not only made into a spectacle (tied in front of the manager's house

⁵⁸⁵ India: Coolies in Assam Tea gardens. House of Commons Debates. 03 March 1890 vol 341 cc1632-6. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1890/mar/03/india-coolies-in-assam-tea-gardens>; Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁸⁶ *Assam Labour Report*, 1889 p.46.

⁵⁸⁷ In an incident reported from Sibsagar in 1886 around 110 left the garden to complain to the Assistant Commissioner. They mentioned the existence of a dungeon, where absconders and recalcitrant coolies were confined and tied with ropes. *The Bengalee* 27, no.49 (December 1886), p.587 in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p.44.

where the other *coolies* could see it) and was brutal (flogged with leather stirrups on their buttocks) but also persistent (one individual beaten three or four times) and repeated (the treatment was meted out to three different women). That it was inflicted on the women *coolies* of the garden, could also have provoked the anxieties of honour (*izzat*) and the threats to it.

The case cited of *coolies* leaving the Monai garden (1914), after an assault was made on one of the *coolies* (Matadin), can also be seen in this light. The unreasonableness of the act was not only because of the disciplining that Matadin was subject to. But the fact that he was punished for the same charge on three different occasions: by the manager, the assistant manager and by the garden staff, which made it highly excessive and illegitimate.⁵⁸⁸

The “moments” of complete breakdown of faith in the manager and management was not restricted to cases of excessive and persistent violence, but other overriding and grave concerns also informed these “marches”. For instance, some workers of Khabang garden (Lakhimpur, 1891) presented themselves before the district commissioner complaining about the misrepresentation made to them. Their issue was that they were made to understand that their “contract” ran for a period of four months. The coolies were “persuaded” by the commissioner to return to their garden. Such a return was again suggested” by the same commissioner when another batch of workers came to complain about overwork and insufficient food. A planter recounting the same incident observed that their return failed to ‘instil a new nature into them’.⁵⁸⁹

The instances already mentioned in which coolies marched upto to the district authorities reveal a range of concerns. The sixty *coolies* of Sessa garden (Lakhimpur, 1901) alleged their tasks were excessive. The two hundred *coolies* of Rowmari (Lakhimpur, 1904) were aggrieved regarding the introduction of a new practice (of using *Jhampis* instead of umbrellas). The entire labour

⁵⁸⁸ Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 120-22, August 1914. NAI.

⁵⁸⁹ D Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p.196.

population of Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905) presented themselves before the commissioner accusing the *sahib* of threatening their *izzat*..⁵⁹⁰

At least three other cases can be cited of *coolies* leaving plantations in the first two decades of twentieth century. In 1910, the *coolies* of Denan tea garden (Cachar) marched out of the garden in a body to complain that they had been short paid.⁵⁹¹ In 1911, Namrup tea garden (Lakhimpur) coolies left to complain that the manager had refused a bonus of ten rupees per head, which they argued was the *dustoor*.⁵⁹² In the year 1917, *coolies* from Karimganj Subdivision (Pathini tea garden, Sylhet) struck work demanding a higher wage, which was refused by the manager. This followed a withdrawal of around six hundred workers making their way to the district headquarters.⁵⁹³

5.11 Conclusions

The nature of Assam plantations in the late nineteenth century, showing a degree of continuity and stability, allowed a notion of customary (*Dustoor*)—a new form of “contract”—to emerge between the managers and the coolies. *Dustoor*, here, was not taken as an unchanging *custom*, but rather, an “acceptable conduct” of the garden, which was unwritten but legitimate. The legitimate conduct, rather being static, was alive to the changes, and therefore, open to further negotiation and bargaining. This qualifies a strong tendency in literature to characterize the nature of labour regime to be exclusively defined by the rules (of the contract) and unilateral excesses of the planter and closed to any bargaining (with the coolies). Such a framework has most fundamentally characterised the nature of “collective” protest of coolies—where life and emerging forms of protest within plantations remains largely curbed, individualised, or turned violent.

⁵⁹⁰ Home Department, Police Branch, July 1905, nos 105-107, Part B. NAI.

⁵⁹¹ Letter from LJ Kershaw, Financial Secretary to the Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 2nd March 1910. Home Department, Police Branch, March 1910, no. 20, Part B. NAI.

⁵⁹² W.J. Reid Financial Secretary to Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, 17th July, 1911. Home Department, Police Branch, July 1911, no. 172, Part B and Home Department, Police Branch, April 1911, no. 55, Part B. NAI.

⁵⁹³ Home Department, Police Branch, April 1917, no. 26, Part B, NAI.

The shifting nature of managerial authority alluded to the fact that an exclusively violent strategy of control was no longer sustainable, and it had to be informed by elements of “reciprocity” and “approval”. The contingencies when *dustoors* were perceived to be gravely violated and “collectivities” forged to address such violations were not removed from the “solidarities” produced and reproduced during the process of migration, life and work on plantations. Such an understanding allowed us to place these fragmentary “episodes” in the plantation practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The anxieties informing collective action ranged from rice, tasks and earnings to issues of discipline, social life and *izzat*. These expressions were conditioning and was conditioned by the nature of workplace organisation, remuneration practices, patterns of residence and garden “occasions” like pay day, weekend drinking and rice distribution day. The production of these “new” occasions was also marked by the “reproduction” of “older” occasions like *Karam Puja*, *Kali Puja* and *Holi* acquiring new roles, without losing their earlier significance. The forms of protest ranging from violence to collective withdrawal was argued to have had a longer presence on plantations and beyond, but were assuming new meanings, purposes and resonance in a rapidly changing context.

6. The End of Contract?: Chargola Exodus and Assam Tea Coolies

6.1 Introduction

In the year 1921 (May), *coolies* from Karimganj subdivision (Sylhet, Chargola valley) struck work demanding a higher wage, which was refused by the managers. This followed a sequence of withdrawal of coolie in batches. They now seemed resolved to go back to their home districts, shouting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to work under his orders. By the middle of the first week itself, already a thousand *coolies* had left and many others were reportedly on strike.

The local planters were extremely concerned about this state of affairs. Warrants were issued on certain *coolies* under Act XIII contract, and a few of them arrested. However, these *coolies* were bailed out and garlanded by nationalist activists in Karimganj, and on the advice of the local officials the further issue of warrants was stopped.⁵⁹⁴ An emergency meeting of the Chargola valley managers and colonial officials was convened at a local club on 6th May.⁵⁹⁵ They expressed grave concern over the coolie unrest in the valley citing the hike in *hazira* (daily wages) as their primary demand; apprehended more strikes in the forthcoming days, and also repeated the usual fears of these incidents turning violent. There was a general “consensus” to offer new rates, which amounted to an increase of thirty to fifty percent.⁵⁹⁶ This had reverberations in the higher echelons of the powerful and highly organised tea lobbies of the twentieth century. Representatives of the Tea Association from Calcutta and Surma Valley met the Governor and Chief Secretary of Assam on the 17th of May and discussed the issue of wage hikes.

⁵⁹⁴ *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.57.

⁵⁹⁵ Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6th May. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922)

⁵⁹⁶ This position however was retraced by the planters during the course of the enquiry suggesting that they accepted the stand because of the awe of the officials present! *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.12.

The Calcutta representative maintained that if the increased wages were persisted with, then the gardens would be compelled to close down.⁵⁹⁷ By the middle of June, the valley was beginning to have a “deserted look” with two gardens reported to have “lost” almost the entire labour force, and most of the gardens suffering “losses” of around thirty to sixty percent.⁵⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the “passive” stance of local colonial establishment in repatriation of the *coolies* was coming under relentless attack from the nationalist press of Calcutta, which was closely observing the dramatic turn of events.⁵⁹⁹ The situation became all the more critical after the so called ‘*Gurkha Outrage*’.⁶⁰⁰ C.F. Andrews, a close associate of Gandhi, who on his way to Assam stopped in Bengal. He was particularly derisive of the Bengal government’s position of not involving itself in the repatriation of the *coolies* and thereby taking a “pro-capitalist” stance—expressed in his writings in newspapers and the public speeches that he made.⁶⁰¹ The official enquiry committee into the incident under Montgomery Wheeler led to heated debates in the Bengal legislative assembly in July 1921. Meanwhile, the situation was becoming more critical in

⁵⁹⁷ Fortnightly Report 2nd half of May for the Province of Assam and Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6th May. NAI.

⁵⁹⁸ Fortnightly report of second half of May for the province of Assam; Communiqué issued by Government of Assam on 5th June 1921. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) pp 116-118; *Report on the administration of Assam for the year 1921-22*; N.N. Mitra, *India Annual Register 1922* and P. C. Bamford, *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat* (Delhi, 1925). Though strikes were showing a sharp upward trend in the Assam Valley plantations during this period but it did not see a mass exodus of the scale witnessed in Chargola Valley and to some extent the adjoining Longai valley area.

⁵⁹⁹ The attention that the Calcutta Press gave to this episode can be gauged from the increase in the articles published on the Assam tea gardens. See the *Report on Native Newspapers of Bengal* for the years 1921 and 1922.

⁶⁰⁰ On the 21st of May, a large body of *coolies* waiting to be repatriated was brutally assaulted by fifty men of Gurkha Rifles, under the personal supervision of the Assistant Deputy Commissioner KC De, at the Chandpur railway station. The official position on the incident was that a threat of cholera epidemic, due to the insanitary conditions in the vicinity of the station, had induced the action, where force was used “minimally”. The public ire over the incident could be gauged from the series of hartals, which followed in the wake of the event. There was hartal in the town of Chandpur, Karimganj and steamer strikes etc. A prominent instance was the “sympathetic” Assam Bengal Railway strike led by C.R. Das. For details see R. Chatterji, ‘C.R. Das and the Chandpur strikes of 1921’, *Bengal Past and Present*, 1974 and D. Banerjee, ‘Historic Assam-Bengal Railway Worker’s Strike (1921): A Survey’, *Proceedings of North East India History Association* (Barapani, 1983).

⁶⁰¹ C.F. Andrews’s role in the whole incident is carefully documented in P.C. Roychaudhury, *CF Andrews: His Life and Times*, (Bombay, 1971). Especially Chapter 4, pp. 78-95.

Assam with the “strike wave” spreading to the Assam valley plantations. A Labour Enquiry Committee was set up in late 1921 with politicians, colonial officials and tea representatives on board, to understand this new and extraordinary moment of crisis in Assam.⁶⁰²

The exodus of Chargola holds a particular significance in the contemporary nationalist writings and later regional histories. Most of these writings picture this as “moment” when the plantation enclaves—demarcated and guarded in the forests of Assam—were finally breached by “outside” ideas and influences. The oppressive labour regime which was built on a close nexus of contracts and contractors was finally broken. The Assam tea coolie was set free. The enormity of the “episode” can be summed up in the words of a contemporary nationalist newspaper:

The strike of the coolies of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against the age-old tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims. From the time the coolie falls into the hands of the artful recruiter, the *arkatti*...till he finds his resting-place in his grave away from his native home, his life is one long drawn-out misery. And not only men but women and children have the same old story...the helpless coolie passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity. He had fallen into conditions from which it seemed to earthly power could rescue him...But his redemption has at last come...he is determined to break the shackles for ever or die in the attempt.⁶⁰³

This theme titled the ‘Nationalist upsurge in Assam’ sponsored by the Government of Assam, the episode stands as a testimony of the messianic powers of Gandhi who comes to Assam to “deliver” the coolies from their bondage:

To the simple, poor people, Gandhiji was an *avatar* and they fondly believed that he had come to Assam to deliver them from their age-old bondage. Gandhiji’s visit to Assam gave the tea workers an opportunity to take part in the Congress programmes. In May 1921, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai valleys of Cachar district began when thousands of labourers of thirteen tea gardens left their gardens, shouting Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰² The other members of the committee were Rai Bahadur Giris Chandra Nag (MLA), Major H.B. Fox (MLC), Babu Ramani Mohan Das ((MLC), SSP Barua (MLC), T. MacMorran (representative of ITA), Rev. Dr. O.C. Williams (Medical missionary), Khan Bahadur Wali Muhammad and J.A. Dawson (bureaucrats). *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922).

⁶⁰³ Amrit Bazaar Patrika, 20th May 1921.

⁶⁰⁴ S.Goswami, ‘The Nationalist upsurge: Its impact on Peasants and tea garden workers’, in A. Bhuyan (ed.) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam* (Guwahati, 2000) p.194. For similar writings see S.K. Ghosh, ‘Labour Strike in the Surma Valley Tea Gardens’ in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 7th Session, Pasighat, 1986-87.

The author, in her zeal to establish the direct role of Gandhi in the episode, plays around with the chronology of the events. Gandhi's visit to Assam in September 1921 is appropriated in the cause-effect sequence where his calls to involve the coolies in the Congress programme, leads to the historic exodus, a full four months back in May of that year!

This chapter does not intend to merely qualify this argument of transition—from contract (unfreedom) to freedom, from passive to political, from individual to collective. It rather seeks to study the “episode” as an entry point to the changing nature of plantation and the strategies of work and life in the early twentieth century.

6.2 Situating the Episode

At the outset, it is useful to make a set of preliminary observations about this particular incident. Unlike other moments of collective withdrawals, the Chargola episode was not restricted to a specific garden and the numbers therefore involved were significantly bigger.⁶⁰⁵ Also the coolies were not simply making a bid to the nearby headquarters, but they seemed determined to go back to the districts from which they originally came. The Assam coolies had often made this “collective” journey from home to the tea garden with the “aid” of *arkattis* and *sardars* and the “protective supervision” of the colonial state. It was probably the first time they were “collectively” making the journey from tea garden to their “homes” without the aid of the recruiters and without the supervision of the colonial state.

Coolies for Sylhet and specially Chargola valley were historically recruited from Ghazipur, Azamgarh, and Benaras districts of North West Provinces by *sardars* and “settled” primarily on Act XIII contract.⁶⁰⁶ In the year 1888, for example, out of 45,000 coolies from North West Provinces in Assam tea plantations, around 35,000 were in Surma Valley. By 1891 more than 57,000

⁶⁰⁵ The entire Chargola valley alongwith the adjoining Longai valley was affected. In total 8,000 out of the total working population of 15,000 left the gardens. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922).

⁶⁰⁶ In Sylhet more than half the total number of Assam contract labourers imported during the year came from North West Provinces and Behar while in the previous year there was a similar preponderance of Bengalis. *Assam Labour Report, 1877*.

coolies came from North West Provinces and more than half were in the district of Sylhet.⁶⁰⁷ The North-Westerns, or the “up-country coolie”, as we had briefly observed, had earned a notorious reputation among Assam planters for being very weak in constitution and showing greater propensity to die and desert. Ironically, these very terms of criticism for the ‘upcountry’ coolies were reversed in the Surma valley, especially the Chargola valley. They, in turn, stood as a confirmation for their suitability as *coolies*.

In case of Chargola valley...contrary to the general opinion elsewhere, *NWP coolies are considered the best available, both in regards to work and ability to stand the Sylhet climate*...coolies of this nationality formed a striking contrast to those found in other parts of the province (Assam).⁶⁰⁸

Again, the “specific” nature of *sardari* recruitment in Chargola valley was underlined by colonial report in the late 1880s. It made a distinction between the two Assam sardars: ‘a *sardar* maybe a *coolie* sent to his country by his employer, or he might be a *coolie* who obtains leave to go home, and at the time of return brings back neighbours, friends and relatives with him’. In the case of Chargola valley, it went on to argue that the ‘second kind of sardar’ existed and the result brought about was what it called was ‘family

⁶⁰⁷ North Western Provinces was renamed as United Provinces in 1901. Assam District Gazetteers. *Special Report on the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89* (Calcutta, 1890) p.214; Sylhet District by B.C. Allen (Calcutta, 1905) p.137.

⁶⁰⁸ There has been a fair evidence of a recruiting region as a source as a source of labour supply for the overseas plantation declining simultaneously with an increase in labour immigration to some inland destination. Chotanagpur region which supplied forty to fifty percent of colonial emigrants during the 1840s and 1850s, became an important source of labour supply to Assam in the following decades. A similar trend was observable in the labour supplying districts of Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur and Jaunpur of North West Provinces, where there was a decline in supply of indentured labourers to the overseas plantation in the last decades of nineteenth century. Mauritius, a major destination of labour from the ‘Eastern Catchment Area’ was already meeting its demands from the settled labour force. A part of this supply got diverted towards the jute mills of Calcutta, the agricultural farms of East Bengal and the tea gardens of Assam. One can clearly locate a switch from a predominantly Bengali labour force to one coming from NWP and Behar in the jute mills of Calcutta from the 1890s. Surma valley plantations especially the plantations of Sylhet, which was coming up most rapidly during this period, drew upon this source of supply. In the period 1881-1890, almost 71,950 coolies were recruited for the Sylhet tea gardens, which doubled on the next decade with 141,650. *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89* p. 17 (emphasis mine.); P. Chaudhury, ‘Labour Migration from United Provinces, 1881-1911’, *Studies in History*, 1992 (8,1) pp.13-14; G. Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 1990) p.77; R. Dasgupta, ‘Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply’ in *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994) p. 18; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) p. 70.

colonization'.⁶⁰⁹ Such informal modes of mobilisation by the *sardars* were deeply affected by the practices of the “free system”. The distinction of the *sardars* and *arkattis* were getting increasingly blurred and *sardars* came to be controlled by “Local agents” within the frameworks of Tea District Labour Supply Association (TDLSA). Such practices were formalised in the twentieth century where the whole system of recruitment came to be channelled through a Labour Board (on the lines of TDLSA).

The changes in the second decade of the twentieth century had a crucial bearing on these developing processes. The war had sparked a boom in Assam tea industry because of a substantial expansion in sales and market of the commodity. Consequently, there was an increased demand for workers, with over a hundred thousand *coolies* arriving on tea gardens in the 1915-16 season. The next two seasons experienced a sudden dip, with only nineteen thousand coming in 1917-18 season. The local demands for labour within the recruiting districts contributed to these shrinking numbers. The end of the war meant that the abnormal labour demand within the recruiting regions had partially subsided, which was not the case in Assam plantations. This was not only to compensate the insufficient supplies of workers in the previous years, but also to meet the fresh and growing requirements generated by large extensions of existing tea gardens and opening of new gardens justified by artificial war time prosperity.⁶¹⁰ The existing workforce was also depleted by an influenza epidemic raging in the tea gardens. There was persistent tendency of workers in South Sylhet moving towards the adjoining Tiperrah region offering new and better opportunities.

In 1918-19 and 1919-20 seasons more than three hundred thousand coolies travelled to the gardens of Assam. In the case of Chargola valley the “new” coolies now recruited through the agency of Tea District Labour Supply Association (TDLSA) came from a different geographical background. By the second decades of twentieth century districts like Basti and Gorakhpur were

⁶⁰⁹ *Special Report on the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam during Years 1886-89* (Calcutta, 1890) p. 23.

⁶¹⁰ The all-India area under tea had risen from 624,000 acres in 1914, to nearly 692,000 acres in 1919. P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p.177.

replacing the older districts of Azamgarh and Ghazipur as the major “suppliers” of recruits for the inland destinations.

YEAR	NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS
1909-10	39,332
1910-11	43,657
1911-12	58,646
1912-13	59,873
1913-14	58,646
1914-15	63,638
1915-16	1,10,376
1916-17	48,130
1917-18	19,407
1918-19	2,22,171
1919-20	1,02,089
1920-21	25,472

Table 6.1 : Labour Migration to Assam 1910-1921.⁶¹¹

The newer recruits were seriously impacted by high mortality during transit and on the plantations. These newer coolies formed the “bulk” of workers leaving the plantations during the exodus. There were reports of over four to five thousand of the coolies returning to the two districts of Gorakhpur and Basti.⁶¹² The new recruit’ theory still does not explain as to why only the new recruits of Chargola valley leave the gardens? Also, how does this explain the

⁶¹¹ *Assam Labour Reports* for the years 1911 to 1922.

⁶¹² Report of the Revenue administration of UP for the year ending 30th September 1921. Reproduced in *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 15.

nature of the mass withdrawal, which was not restricted to a particular garden and, at times, not just to the newer coolies? For instance, over eleven hundred coolies leaving the valley during the “exodus” had worked for more than decade and more than two hundred fifty coolies were there for almost fifteen years.⁶¹³

6.3 Markets and New Networks of Information

Chargola valley extended about thirteen miles north and south where a government road ran all the way down dividing the gardens on west and east side to it.⁶¹⁴ The gardens being in close proximity meant that it opened up possibilities of interaction, association and circulation of information.⁶¹⁵ This also brings into relief the specific social terrain of the Sylhet district. Being a densely populated region, the garden and the surrounding village had significant overlaps. *Ganj*, a very common suffix used in Sylhet district, indicated it to be a market place.⁶¹⁶

Bazaars and *haats* as we have noticed emerged as sites where new ties and relationships were forged. Very crucial to this was the presence of a large body of time-expired *coolies* who were settled outside the garden grants (*basti*). Time-expired workers also moved between the garden and the *basti*, retaining familial and social ties with workers on the garden.

The newer *coolies* coming from the home districts established larger networks of information. For instance, coolies coming from the districts of Gorakhpur and Basti were witness to “Gandhi talk”, where Gandhi had assumed cultic status and rumours about him were very much in the circulation.

6.4 Anxieties of Colonial State and Nationalists

⁶¹³ *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.11.

⁶¹⁴ A. H Walker, *Rivers, Roads and Tea Gardens of Cachar and Sylhet* (Calcutta, 1895) p. 21.

⁶¹⁵ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) pp.19-22 and *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.11.

⁶¹⁶ *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906) pp. 66-69.

In such a context, one of the earliest measures taken by the colonial administration of Assam during the exodus was prohibition of meetings and speeches within seven kilometres of the gardens (section 144). It was hoped that this measure would be able to counter the rumours, which it believed to have been a result of the intensive propaganda campaign of the nationalist volunteers filling the mind of the *coolies* with wild ideas. However, these actions did not yield desired results because of what it called as the covert nature of propaganda campaign targeting the *coolie* population in markets and other places frequented by them.⁶¹⁷ The Labour Enquiry Committee also makes the point:

It is probable that secret propaganda had been carried on for some time in the gardens in the Chargola valley. Otherwise it is difficult to account for the extent and suddenness of the exodus. There is also no doubt that after the prohibition of meetings an insidious campaign was being conducted surreptitiously on some gardens.⁶¹⁸

This clearly indicates that it was not the regular meetings and speeches of the non co-operators but *bazaar* talk and gossip which were creating all the nasty chat. A proposal by the government of Assam, to apply the Seditious Meeting Act (Act X of 1911) to the districts of Sylhet and Cachar and declare Karimganj subdivision as a proclaimed area clearly stems from such concerns of not being able to check this feeling and articulation of dissension.⁶¹⁹

Such unease was aptly reflected in the measures deemed necessary by the colonial state to tackle the situation. Attempts were made to strengthen the armed police, intelligence system was beefed up and counter propaganda work was undertaken.⁶²⁰ A desire to make an impression on the minds of *coolies* about the continued existence of the British Raj—the official version of the situation, was sought to be forcefully pushed. A colonial officer (Llyod) was

⁶¹⁷ Telegram dated 18th May from Chief Secretary Government of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, Political Branch, June 1921, nos. 143-146. NAI

⁶¹⁸ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.19.

⁶¹⁹ Strike of tea garden coolies in Assam, Proposal of the Government of Assam to apply the Seditious meeting Act X Of 1911 to that province. Home Department, Political Branch, , nos.143-146, June 1921. NAI.

⁶²⁰ Political situation in Assam-Increase of the strength of troops in the province for internal security purposes. Home Department, Political Branch, no. 534, 1922. NAI

especially deputed to organise counter-propaganda work in Surma Valley. He held a series of meetings in Sylhet district for this purpose. Special assistance was sought from the United Provinces Government to this end, and they accordingly sent two men to conduct counter-propaganda work amongst tea garden *coolies* from United Provinces. Assam rifles were augmented in affected areas so that the continued authority of the British Raj could be impressed upon the *coolies*.⁶²¹

The desire to control information was not limited to the colonial state; the nationalists, as well, realised their shortcomings. A very familiar and often quoted explanation given by the *coolies* of Chargola valley for their decision to leave was that it was *Gandhi ka Hookum*. However, making this as a case for connection with the Non co-operation movement needs to be qualified. Gandhi's first reaction to the exodus is very interesting in this regard:

*I should be sorry if anybody used my name to lead the men to desert their employers, it was clear enough that it is purely a labour trouble..(I was) informed that the trouble is purely economic*⁶²²

In another issue of Young India, in a reply to a planter accusing him and his men of inducing the *coolies* to strike, Gandhi goes on to write:

I can assure him (the planter) that I never advised a single *coolie* in Assam to strike. I do not profess to know the problem of labour there. . *He should moreover know that there is no non-co-operation going on with capital or capitalists.* Non Co-operation is going on with the existing Government as a system. But there is bound to be non-cooperation wherever there is evil, oppression and injustice, whether anybody wishes it or not. The people, having found the remedy, will resort to it. If they do stupidly or unjustifiably, they alone will be the real losers.⁶²³

Again, during his visit to Surma Valley in September 1921, Gandhi particularly expressed his disapproval of the *coolie* strikes and hartals and censured them for indifference to what he regarded as the more important matters of boycott and the use of spinning wheel.⁶²⁴

⁶²¹ Fortnightly report for the Second half of July for the Province of Assam. NAI

⁶²² *Young India*, 8th June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX. Emphasis mine.

⁶²³ *Young India*, 29th June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX, pp.299-300. Emphasis mine.

⁶²⁴ Khan Bahadur Saiyid Abdul Majid, a minister who visited Sylhet during the period said, ‘..(that) the people were quite unanimous in thinking that Gandhi unseen was a far greater personage than Gandhi seen..and the common people’s observation was that he was only a *kaya*’. Fortnightly report for 1st half of September 1921. NAI

The investment of the Gandhian message in this context, often at variance to the dictates of Gandhi and the official Congress version, suggest a lack of control over the information networks within the plantation area covering a number of gardens. An argument of these networks of information inhabiting an “autonomous” sphere is not made where the contacts with other *coolies*, villagers and the non co-operators had a significant bearing.

This period was witness to a general climate of defiance, anticipating a possible end to the British Raj and the imminence of Gandhi’s Raj. Many demonstrations, public meetings and *hartals* in the nearby Subdivisional headquarters of Karimganj and the Sylhet town were held. The realisation of land revenue in the adjoining villages was also extremely low. All of this would have been very strong influence in the circulation of such ideas. The workers bound by a work-schedule could not have personally attended the public meetings and speeches in large numbers, but nonetheless the interactions with villagers, time-expired workers and even the non-co-operators at these *haats* could not deprive them of the “buzz in the town”.

6.5 The Legitimacy of the Manager

The post war period was also marked by a new and intensive economy drive in the tea industry. The garden managers were given little discretion in effecting wage hikes or giving out other inducements to workers experiencing want and scarcity. Concerns were raised about the prestige of managers being undermined by the “hard and fast” decisions regarding wage rates by their agencies in Calcutta. There were cases of *coolies* wiring directly to these agencies for relief, which was said to be ‘most subversive of discipline and the very necessary patriarchal control of the manager’. The perpetuation of the authority structure within the plantation, as we have argued, could no longer be premised exclusively on coercive mechanisms of control. It had to be based on a degree of “approval” and “acceptable conduct”. In such a situation, consider the scene on the morning of the 3rd of May in the Anipur tea estate described by the manager, from where it all began:

..On the morning of May 3rd a number of *coolies* demanded an increase of wages, i.e., 8 annas and 6 annas for men and women. Previous to this an increase of wages had not been asked for. I (the manager) told them it was impossible for me to give them

the wages demanded... some one amongst them shouted *Gandhi Maharaj ki jai*. They left the muster ground in a body and in half an hour were leaving the garden.

It is important to recap the decisions taken in the meeting of the managers and local officials held at Dullabcherra Club on the 6th May, just four days into the first batches of *coolies* leaving the tea estates of the valley. The extremely tense and nervous body of the planters reluctantly agreed to hike wages. They further felt that such a decision should be communicated to the *coolies* at the earliest to halt the spread of the unrest. The resolutions of the meeting read:

While recognising the danger of yielding to pressure and the encouragement that such yielding [Wage hike] may give to agitation elsewhere the officials did not consider this a sufficient reason for refusing concessions just due and absolutely necessary to keep the labour on the gardens..we therefore advise to concede the rates they had unanimously agreed on, and to do this at once and not wait for further trouble.⁶²⁵

Yet, this could not prevent a delay in its general implementation. At times, concessions were withdrawn on many gardens, after being announced, as they were not being ratified by the Calcutta agents. For instance, on the 8th of May, Dunlop (manager of Goombhira division) agreed to hike the wages in the order of 6 annas (for men) and 4 annas (for women.). This proposal was not approved by agents of the company. Such a move could only have eroded the credibility, legitimacy and sense of authority of Dunlop. It was not entirely surprising that the coolies of Goombhira division started leaving the garden by the 10th of May. Even the personal assurances given by the manager of Dullabcherra that concession offered would not being reversed, could not stop the *coolies* of his garden leaving. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that the concessions after all would not be confirmed.⁶²⁶

Some managers complained that their submission to the demand of wage hikes under the pressure of strikes had actually proved counterproductive. The workers believed that it was on Gandhi's orders that the wages have been increased:

...All the remaining *coolies* [of the garden] had worked regularly throughout the week at the old rate of wages. Sunday 8th, was our pay day, and pay was proceeding as usual when word came that three neighbouring gardens had raised the wages to 6 and 4

⁶²⁵ Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government Officials, 6th May 1921. *Report, ALECR 1921-22*.

⁶²⁶ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.84.

annas. From this moment the *coolies* were absolutely mad and for three days the garden was in an uproar. *It was stated that Gandhi has raised wages.*⁶²⁷

The decision to hike wages did not necessarily reinvigorate a sense of satisfaction among workers as expected by the managers and the colonial administration. The extra Assistant commissioner of Karimganj Subdivision, for example, ventilated the complaints of several managers that even with increased wages the *coolies* were doing just as they liked and were not working satisfactorily. Wage hikes did not necessarily have a deterrent effect and *coolies* on some other gardens went on strike for one or two days even after the wages had been increased.⁶²⁸ Some managers, who considered themselves extremely fortunate of not having to deal with strikes on their gardens, experienced a ‘nasty feeling’ among their *coolies* during the period.⁶²⁹

...There was a feeling of unrest before the exodus. When I met some *coolies* they were bitterly complaining against the Manager...they said that the manager would not listen to their grievances...when I went to the garden after the exodus and obtained evidence of his extreme unpopularity, I dismissed him. If I had kept him on, I am afraid I would have lost all my *coolies*.⁶³⁰

The manager of Tea Estate related about a male returnee who said that he would not have stayed back at the time of exodus for even a rupee a day!⁶³¹

The refusal of the first batches of coolies who had left the gardens to accept the rice and other provisions at Karimganj town is particularly suggestive. They believed that the supplies has been provided by their manager, who no longer could claim their loyalty. A most perplexed Subdivisional officer of Karimganj relates the incident to the Enquiry Committee:

I obtained a stock of rice and salt and arranged to supply the *coolies*. About 200 *coolies* came up to me on the 7th or 8th May as far as I remember and the first question

⁶²⁷ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.58.

⁶²⁸ Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj and H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) pp. 61-63, p.56.

⁶²⁹ A. Brown, Rajnagar TE. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.47.

⁶³⁰ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.28.

⁶³¹ H.A Wray, Manager, Singlacherra Tea Estate. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.55.

they put me was whether this rice was being supplied by Government or by the tea gardens; they said that they would not touch it if it was supplied by the gardens...I told them that if they did not want to take rice and salt that was offered them, they might go. Nobody took anything and they all went.⁶³²

This bankruptcy of legitimacy did arise from a momentary failure of the managers to effect wage hikes. This has to be more concretely situated with other complimentary concerns. It was observed during the time of the Chargola exodus that there was a tendency of workers declining to go to hospitals.⁶³³ Dr. Dunlop of the Chargola Valley read this ‘resistance’ as a part of the ‘Gandhi propaganda’ to renounce hospitals and Western medicine.⁶³⁴ It was not simply a case of tradition versus modernity in the *coolie*’s resistance to go to the hospitals. The general ineffectiveness as relating to the high rates of mortality, especially during this period, evoked a sense of cynicism.

Year	Total Deaths
1917-1918	21,961
1918-1919	62,176
1919-1920	44,866
1920-1921	28,927

Table 6.2 : Mortality on Assam tea gardens 1917-1921⁶³⁵

⁶³² It is significant to note here the cultural value of salt as an index of loyalty. For accepting food/salt provided by someone would mean an acknowledgement of allegiance to him and the failure to do so would be deemed as *namak-harami* –the term in Hindustani for disloyalty. Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 64.

⁶³³ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.97.

⁶³⁴ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.97.

⁶³⁵ *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.94 (Emphasis mine) and *Assam Labour Report* for the year 1917-18, 1918-19 and 1919-1920.

The virulent influenza epidemic raging in the tea gardens claimed 40,000 lives in the period from 1919 to 1921.⁶³⁶ More than 150,000 people lost their lives in the tea estates of Assam in the 1917 to 1921 period. The Labour Enquiry Committee particularly observed these conditions as the reasons for ‘discontentment with garden life’:

The fact that the best medical attention on the gardens could often do little to save life in such circumstances conduced to a feeling of despair, and even to a belief among the more ignorant that the garden was haunted by some evil spirit. It is not, therefore a surprise that some of these *unfortunate immigrants lost faith in European medicines and methods of treatment and that when ill-health began to prey on body and mind and the earning capacity was diminished, they became discontented with the conditions of tea-garden life.*⁶³⁷

The failure of the authorities to check falling earnings and protecting lives aggravated a growing feeling that something was drastically wrong. The changing conditions of work, which further affected the material/social circumstances (*dustoor*), fed into this disillusionment.

6.6 Changing Practices of Work, Life and Control on Sylhet Plantations

The differentiated nature of plantation landscape in Assam was not just limited to the nature of contracts, practices of contracting and sources of labour supply. In certain significant ways the work practices also took particular and distinctive trajectories.

For instance, in Surma Valley plantations (especially Sylhet) “fine plucking”, which was becoming a “norm” in the Assam valley plantations, was rarely practised. “Coarse plucking” giving greater yield compensated for the lower price it realised in the market.⁶³⁸ During war, when quality became a secondary consideration, the result was still coarser plucking in Sylhet. However, the end of war led to a huge accumulation of tea stocks.⁶³⁹ The garden agents realised

⁶³⁶ *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.94.

⁶³⁷ *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.95. Emphasis mine

⁶³⁸ For the differential abilities in the modes of plucking. See Chapter 5

⁶³⁹ The war had a tremendous stimulus to the industry. In the period 1914-1919, the increase in production of Indian tea was nearly 64 million pounds. In the 1919 season there was a shortage

that the remedy for this overproduction lay in switching to fine plucking. This had a twofold impact: firstly, it made a serious dent to the voluntary opportunities for overtime work. Between January and May 1921, there was little overtime work. Overtime hoeing virtually stopped till the winters when the semi abandoned tea was being reclaimed.⁶⁴⁰ Secondly, the precision demanded in fine plucking meant a fall in the quantity plucked by individual workers necessitating a revision in the daily task for plucking. However, such changes were not usually recognized and many managers driven by “economy” steadfastly stuck to their old rates.

It is therefore not surprising that *coolies* on gardens demanded the reduction of *nirikh* (task) or *nal* (measurement).⁶⁴¹ *Coolies* of a particular tea estate went on a strike demanding similar wages as the neighbouring gardens. But when the revised wages, with an increase in tasks was offered they refused, continuing with their strike.⁶⁴²

This was aggravated by the “novel” practices adopted by plantations in the assessment of tasks. The usual “deductions” made for the weight of the basket, for wet leaf and for the quality of the leaf plucked were more stringently enforced. The managers started deducting the “wastage” in manufacture of tea called the ‘factory charges’. One manager went to the extent of penalising the workers two pounds (of the weight plucked) in peak seasons to “compensate” for the limited plucking during the “off season”.⁶⁴³ No hard and fast rule was

in the shipping space. Again in 1920, congestion at the Port of London, made it necessary to regulate shipments from India. Thus the 1919 crop was not completely shipped till June 1920. Tea had to be kept on the gardens during the worst part of the monsoon and they arrived at market flat and dull showing the effects of storage. Then the unfavourable conditions in London rendered necessary a limitation of the quantity of tea offered at the weekly auctions in Mincing Lane, as the dealers were unable to finance or pay for larger quantities P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p.177

⁶⁴⁰ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.59.

⁶⁴¹ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.65

⁶⁴² Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.42.

⁶⁴³ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.42.

observed in regard to these deductions and in some gardens deductions were as high as fifty percent.⁶⁴⁴

Payment through the so called ‘ticket-system’ was a widespread practice in the Sylhet plantations as can be seen in the next image.



Figure 6.1: Tokens on Sylhet Tea Gardens.⁶⁴⁵

The gardens generally cashed these tokens on a weekly basis. By this time the *coolies* might have already been indebted to the shopkeepers. The Labour committee came across cases where the local shopkeepers, accepting the tokens did not honour its full face value, taking huge discounts on them. The Superintendent of Police of Sylhet, observed that a *coolie* taking a ticket to the shopkeeper would get less than fifty percent of its’ worth.⁶⁴⁶

The cutting down on the expenditure and changed working practices within the garden meant that certain “norms” were not honoured—*coolies* in many gardens were not given the usual agreement bonuses, overtime was reduced, and they were forced to take leave. A tea manager noticed the “cumulative” effect of these practices:

⁶⁴⁴ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.32.

⁶⁴⁵ See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion on the token system. <http://www.koi-hai.com>

⁶⁴⁶ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.31.

The unrest, if any, amongst coolies was I think mainly due to cutting down of expenditure. In our own case it meant that coolies were not given the usual agreement bonuses and a smaller amount of *ticca*, and were also encouraged, and in some cases, forced to take more leave than they wanted and could not, of course, and understand the reason. This fact combined with Gandhi talk that was openly being instilled into them by Bengalis in the bustee and bazaar, had the effect of unsettling them and making them think there was something wrong.⁶⁴⁷

During the post war period, land offered to the coolies was increasingly becoming scarce due to the sustained influx of newer workers. This was compounded by the large scale tea extensions to address to the “abnormal” demands in the markets. They intruded into the land held by workers for cultivation, or grazing lands for their cattle. The South Sylhet gardens, which were in close proximity to the independent state of Tipperah, experienced a significant shift of workers towards the new gardens being opened there. They were offered higher wages and rent free land for cultivation for a term of two to three years.⁶⁴⁸ Babu Rajniranjan Deb, a tea manager, noted that in the period (1916-1921) about fifty percent of the workers had ‘peacefully absconded to Tipperah, without causing any commotion’. He adds further that ‘*coolies* are attracted to Tipperah because they say that they would get 8 annas for each *hazira* and also plenty of paddy fields’.⁶⁴⁹

The “choices” being exercised by these workers in accessing better opportunities was apparently compromised by the contracts they were held under. A “freedom” from Assam contract in Sylhet (where it abolished in 1908) was limited by a peculiar articulation of Act XIII. The rights of control (like private arrest) were still invoked by planters. Such planter aspirations were in fact articulated during the discussions regarding the Assam contract in the early twentieth century. A demand for a short contract in lieu of the Act

⁶⁴⁷ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.64 (Emphasis mine.)

⁶⁴⁸ The manager of Balisera and Lungla tea estate related to the Enquiry Commission of spending more than Rs. 1,80,000 and 60,000 respectively in recruiting during the 1915-1920 period without any increase in the working population, most of them making their way to Tipperah especially in the years 1919 and 1920. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) pp. 87-88; *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) pp.35, 37-38, 41.

⁶⁴⁹ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p .29.

XIII contract was made by the local tea association. This was argued to offer the managers of the gardens giving out bonus some degree of “protection”. Chief Commissioner of Assam, while ruling out the possibility of amending Act XIII contract (which applied to whole of India), encouraged them to arrive at some “common-sense practice” for the interpretations of its provisions.⁶⁵⁰ Such “common sense” practices meant that not only four hundred forty odd warrants were issued between July 1920 and June 1921 in two subdivisions of Sylhet for “breaches” against workers but there were cases of managers sending *chowkidars* to neighbouring gardens to bring back workers.⁶⁵¹ Instances of *coolies* returning from prison to complete their contract on the garden were not entirely a rare.

6.7 Gandhi Baba ka Hookum: A New Will to Leave

These conditions of a bankruptcy of legitimacy and a general sense of changed conditions in life exacerbated the repressed oppressions and aspirations within the plantations, which was increasingly articulated during the period. Grievances and, at times, purposeful action was directed against the authority structure within the plantation.

The manager of the Doloi tea company said that the *coolies* on his garden went on strike for five days demanding the dismissal of a particular *babu*.⁶⁵² During the April strikes in the Burtoll and Lydiacherra gardens, the *coolies* complained of *babus* cheating them in payments and drove out some of them. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that they wanted to get rid of the *babus* first and then deal with the manager.⁶⁵³ The batches of *coolies* of Anipur Tea

⁶⁵⁰ *Indian Tea Association Report* 1905.

⁶⁵¹ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.86.

⁶⁵² R Pringle, Manager, Doloi Tea Company *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.48.

⁶⁵³ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.72.

Estate when interrogated by the Subdivisional officer at Karimganj complained about the *Jamadar* of the garden.⁶⁵⁴

The authority exercised by the *babus* over and above that of their *sardars*, who were supposed to be their in-charge, was also resented. They were detested for their corrupt practices in book keeping.⁶⁵⁵

Coolies on certain gardens went on strike objecting to the posting of a particular manager recalled from leave.⁶⁵⁶ JW Hallan, the manager of Phulcherra Division, talked about the “unreasonable” demand made by his *coolies* that no Europeans should speak to the women and no *Babus* should speak directly to them and that everything should be done through their *sardars*.⁶⁵⁷

The sexual exploitation of the ‘*coolie* women’ by the managers also drew deep antipathy. The *Khoreal shooting case* where a manager shot a *coolie* who was resisting his daughter being forcibly taken by him was widely publicised. The fact that the Manager got away with a small fine could not have but drawn deep resentment.⁶⁵⁸

The general depressed standard of life and loss of “faith” in the managers to address those concerns was inscribed in the message and person of Gandhi. There were reports of *coolies* receiving letters from United Provinces containing the news that Gandhi was arranging their conveyance back home. Some of the departing *coolies* claimed that Gandhi has sent a steamer to Karimganj to take them back where they would be given land for free. There were rumours of food without work, and that land under tea was being given up for rice cultivation. Some claimed that garden and *hats* belonged to Gandhi

⁶⁵⁴ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.63.

⁶⁵⁵ Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.31.

⁶⁵⁶ Fortnightly report for the 2nd half of May. NAI

⁶⁵⁷ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) pp.38-39.

⁶⁵⁸ The local press most extensively covered Khoreal Shooting case and even news articles in Calcutta were published in evidence to the oppression of *coolies* by the planters and complicity of the state in it.

and that the manager had no right over them, and that they could cut out the tea and plant paddy and sugarcane instead.⁶⁵⁹ In certain gardens, the news of wage hikes in other garden, made some coolies claim that Gandhi has increased wages and they demanded similar hikes.⁶⁶⁰

Gandhi Ka Hookum symbolised the yearnings, anxieties and the general spirit of defiance of the *coolies* expressed and legitimised through cultural/religious idioms, which were much in popular circulation. During the time of the exodus there were reports of a boy in one of the gardens of Anipur proclaiming that the spirit of Gandhi had come upon him and asked all the people to gather around and listen to what he had to say (in effect what Gandhi has to say or *Gandhi ka Hookum*). He was placed on a Hindu shrine in the lines and worshipped by *coolies* for two days. Another man made similar claims in the Singlacherra gardens.⁶⁶¹ There were reports of *coolies* taking oath over a bowl of holy water (*Shapath Lena*) not to disobey *Gandhi Ka Hookum* of leaving the gardens in a body or else being turned into mud or stone!⁶⁶²

Victory cries of *Gandhi Maharaj ki Jai* (Hail King Gandhi) manifested that defiance into collective action. Many *coolies* interrogated by their managers during the exodus said that they were leaving because their *bhailog* (brothers)

⁶⁵⁹ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.62

⁶⁶⁰ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.57.

⁶⁶¹ Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922) p.57 & 64.

⁶⁶² Shahid Amin in his fascinating study of 'Gandhi as Mahatma' argues that Gandhi's pratap and appreciation of his message derived from popular Hindu beliefs and practices and the material culture of the peasantry. What the peasants thought about Mahatma were the projections on the existing patterns of popular beliefs about the 'worship of worthies' in rural north India. The stories of Mahatma from the Swadesh journal that he analyses falls in four distinct groups- testing the power of the Mahatma, opposing the Mahatma, opposing the Gandhian creed and boons granted and/or miracles performed. We do not access to such vast and continuous accounts in the region of our study but the last three categories broadly applies. S. Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22', *Subaltern Studies III* pp. 1-61. Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 (Shillong, 1922); P. C. Bamford, *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat* (Delhi, 1925) p.61.

had decided to go.⁶⁶³ Formal discharge certificates were needed to be obtained for leaving the gardens for coolies serving under Act XIII contract.⁶⁶⁴ The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj pointed out to several batches of the *coolies* of the “illegality” of their action, but later admitted to this practice of coolies coming to the headquarters and applying for discharge. The tea workers on the Assam plantations had for long established these traditions of “complaining” and more so they now claimed it to be *Gandhi Baba ka hookum*.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ C. Townsend, Superintendent of the Longai Tea Company and H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra T.E. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) pp.51-52, p.56.

⁶⁶⁴ Out of 8,799 *coolies* leaving 3,715 were under agreement, 2,286 were not under agreement and 2,798 were dependents. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p.10.

⁶⁶⁵ *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 63.

7. Conclusion

To conclude this study at a moment of “collective withdrawal” of contract coolies in the twentieth century was not to posit a counter tendency to the “collective arrival” of contract coolies in the nineteenth century. The attempt here was not deny the exploitatative nature of colonial capitalism and coercive intents of the contract labour regimes, but to shift the focus on the contract workers of plantations and see how they were negotiating, intervening and even reconstituting such processes.

Such a shift in focus was located in an understanding of plantations as modes of organising work and labour which was differentiated in time and space. The inauguration of “experimental” plantations in Assam in the 1830s by Robert Bruce came out of a realisation that the idea of “making tea” could not remain fixed on acquiring the “skills” of manufacture from the Chinese, but required “systematic cultivation” of tea. The emerging rhythms of plantation work process, i.e. the division between periods of intense work and slack period, coincided with the rhythms of agriculture of the surrounding areas. This did not encourage the local population to shift as “settled” workers, given the low levels of remunerations being offered by the planters. The private plantation of Assam Company in the 1840s faced similar concerns of “settling” workers. A local migrant group (Kacharis) was induced by the company to work on the plantations. By the 1850s, a degree of systematisation and routinisation of these plantation work process had been established but it was still marked by irregular conditions of life and work. The Kacharis exhibited a degree of concert and purpose around issues of wages, timing of payment and supply of rice that lead to several work stoppages, strikes and mass withdrawal from the plantations. The planters attempted to resolve these “labour difficulties” by sourcing a new group of long distance migrant labour, and through a new system of penal contract (Act XIII). The crux of this contract— introduced in 1863—was to “criminalise” breaches of contract by Kachari workers. Again the so called coolie solution, namely the sourcing of long distance migrant workers, was underwritten by an active intervention of the colonial state.

The logic of colonial intervention and contract was premised on discourses of protection and exceptionality (situation of Assam) to reconcile the opposed interests of workers and planters. The plantations of the 1860s marked a break from the “settlement” strategies of the early plantation companies (Assam Company and Jorehaut Tea Company). This also set the stage for a massive expansion of planting activities, clearing of forests and digging of land, under demands of hard physical labour, poor infrastructure of life and low remunerations (tea mania). The work categories of plantation agriculture (like plucking and jungle clearing) which privileged prior initiation and familiarity became even more relevant for the newly hired workers labouring on tea gardens. The “discrepancy” in the individual performance, induced by the degrees of exposure to plantation work and by the specific location/condition of the site of plantation, was further complicated by the emergent practices of “task” assessment of the labour. There were several occasions of workers moving en masse out of these sites, making collective complaints to the magistrate stationed at the district headquarters for acts of violence, difficult nature of work, and non-payment of due wages. The project to render workers immobile was, most clearly, encapsulated in the formulation of the Assam contract enabling the planters to “legally” and privately arrest; which was already rampant in practice.

Contract on Assam tea plantations emerges in a history of contestation, struggles and failure in the mobilisation of workers and the implementation of work routines. Its specific manifestation—the presence of two contracts—tried to intervene and reconstitute the frame in which work and life was to be conducted. This was, curiously and meticulously, premised on a discourse of protection for the contracting parties (read planter) in an exceptional context (like Assam of the 1860s). Neither the premise of exceptionality (of Assam), nor the necessity of “protection” (through private arrest) would lose much sway during the course of the nineteenth century. Private arresting was particularly unleashed by planters to immobilize workers and also gave enough leverage to force work. The self-assumption of magisterial authority meant that, apart from the authorized powers to privately track the “runaways”, the managers felt generally empowered to privately punish the ‘offenders’. The collapsing of the roles of policeman and judge in the person of the planter

critically conditioned the developing authority structure and work relations on Assam plantations.

The premises of protection, theoretically, opened a space for guaranteeing 'worker rights' with some intention to regulate wages, working hours and living standards. But the protection of coolie was often seen by the planters to be violating their protection. While the planter had to be protected by legal enactments (like the private arrest rights) and several exceptions, the coolie was to be protected by logic (as economic investments of planters) and good intentions (of planters). The assumption of magisterial authority in the person of the planter, further meant that the question of worker protection was no longer a matter of state jurisdiction but strictly a private affair. This protection was most explicitly compromised on the question of the continued applicability of a general master and servant Act—Act XIII. The Act XIII, initially employed by Assam planters to curb the bargaining instincts of local workers, came to be used at least from the 1870s to reengage the swelling numbers of workers having served their contracts (so called time-expired workers). The loss of hold from the Assam contract was to be restored by the Act XIII contract.

The broadening of the notion of contract was also occasioned by the broadening of the identity of the recruiter (arkatti and sardar). The growing focus on sardars as cheaper and qualitatively better recruiter (bringing in families and friends), did not make the arkattis redundant. This was again tied to differentiated nature of plantation landscape in Assam with differing objectives and capabilities of mobilizing workers and organizing work.

This formalizing relationship (of contract and contractors) was attempted to be reconstituted by the discourse of freedom (from 1870s) and most specifically by the 1882 Act. Like protection, freedom had a partial nature and purpose. This changed the nature of contracts (longer harsher contracts) and deregulated the recruitment (easier to recruit to the extent that to be able to abduct). The withering away of state in recruitment (celebrated as freedom) blurred the lines between the sardar and contractor and institutionalized abuses in labour recruitment—now bordering on human trafficking.

Alterations in the nature of contracts and deregulation of labour recruiting stimulated large scale migration to Assam. This demographic shift was also occasioned by a greater systematisation of plantations and new modes of work intensification. The technological innovations and mechanisation, which enhanced the nature and capability of tea manufacturing, did not comprehensively affect the cultivation methods. The field work and plucking of leaves were carried out manually and even required a greater human input to keep pace with the mechanising and quickening production process. Specialization and intensification of work became an integral feature of this routinising plantation regime. This 'industrial' organisation of work on plantations is not to imply a historical conflict between the rhythms of 'modern' civilized industry (plantation) and the 'primitive' ways of tribal/peasant life (of the coolies). Yet, the excessiveness of such strategies was also becoming increasingly evident.

The anxieties of unpopularity of Assam in the regions of recruitment and the "question" of drink on the plantations were rooted in these interconnected and overlapping processes. An unpacking of the overarching category of unpopular Assam ranged from it being perceived as a place of no return, the fear of labour recruiters, difficulties of earnings, to the grave threats to social life on plantations. In the same framework, the practices of worker drinking did not remain confined to the "concerns" of plantation capitalism relentlessly in search for greater efficiency, productivity or emerge as new "modes" of control for planters; but also revealed how working lives and cultures were taking shape on the plantations. The interest here was to stress on how such cultures were informing and informed by the developing routines on the plantations.

This line of reasoning was furthered by exploring a notion of customary (Dustoor)—a new form of "contract"—emerging between the managers and workers in the context of a stabilising and routinising plantations. Dustoor was not understood as an unchanging custom, but rather an "acceptable conduct" of the garden. This qualifies a strong tendency in literature to characterize the nature of labour regime to be exclusively defined by the rules (of the contract)

and unilateral excesses of the planter and therefore closed to any bargaining (with the coolies).

The shifting nature of managerial authority alluded to the fact that an exclusively violent strategy of control was no longer sustainable, and it had to be informed by elements of “reciprocity” and “approval”. The contingencies when dustoors were perceived to be gravely violated and “collectivities” forged to address such violations, were not exclusive from the “solidarities” produced and reproduced during the process of migration, life and work on plantations. Such an understanding allowed us to place these fragmentary “episodes” in the plantation practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The anxieties informing collective action ranged from rice, tasks and earnings to issues of discipline, social life and honour. These expressions were conditioning and was conditioned by the nature of workplace organisation, remuneration practices, patterns of residence and garden “occasions” like pay day, weekend drinking and rice distribution day. The practice of collective withdrawal drew from a longer tradition initiated by local Kachari labour in early plantations, but such actions assumed new meanings and significance and performed new roles in the changed plantation structures of the late nineteenth century.

The exodus in Chargola was not a historically unprecedented or “unique” event in the sense of an emergence of an entirely new form of collective consciousness among workers. However, in terms of scope, scale and numbers involved and the impact it produced, it marked a certain departure from the past. It showed certain features, like in terms of its scope and numbers involved, that needed to be explained. This we argued, had to be located in the specific history of plantation in the region. The nature and modes of recruitment of the coolies was showing changes happening in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The war and the fillip that it gave to the tea industry meant a new recruitment drive in the industry. The coolies now recruited by the Labour Board came from a different social/regional background in the Valley.

A closer look into the valley and the plantations gave us critical insights into how the networks of communications were forged and information circulated.

Rumours in circulation revealed a deep sense of anxiety and crisis among the workers. These anxieties were informed by the context showing a sense of change for the worse. The crisis could not have been better represented: with managers failing to hike wages, medicines failing to protect lives and the British Raj failing to the onslaught of the imminent Gandhi Raj. The perfect makings of a “world turned upside down”. Gandhi ka *Hookum*, in turn, defined that new authority and the legitimacy the act—in this case of moving out of the plantations and attempting to go back home.

The coolies bounded by contracts were imagined to be immobilised in the routines of work and discipline by the planters. Such immobilisation and routines could not be entirely established nor be completely appropriated for the interests of planters. The plantation labour regime showed inventiveness and flexibility in developing modes of control beyond the contract. The Assam tea gardens perdured the end of contracts and so did the coolies. But now with different meanings and significance. But that is another story.

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